Analysis Of Youth Crime Interventions Essay, Research Paper

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This paper examines possible root causes of youth crime, and appropriate interventions to correct the problem. Articles that will be consulted include Gordon L. Spencer s (1977) work on the school s role in delinquency, David Brownfield and Kevin Thompson s (1991) work

on the role of one s peers in delinquency and Joseph H. Rankin and L. Edward Wells

(1990) work on the role of the family in delinquent behavior. Also examined for possible interventions include Ed Earnest s (1996) report on a treatment program operating in Alabama, and Mark Steward s (1997) report on a treatment program in Missouri. The Canadian Juristats are also used to help place statistical values on youth crime, and in order to determine how great a problem youth crime actually is.

Spencer s (1977) article helps shed light on one of the major contributors to youth

delinquency and crime, namely the educational system. Often researchers will note the

tendency for youthful offenders to be failures in their communities and schools, but

Spencer s research investigates to what extent the schools themselves contribute to

delinquency. Spencer notes common trends associated with youthful offenders such as that they are often school drop outs, that they are educationally retarded four to five years on average, and that they usually have an intense dislike for school. However instead of looking to the youth as the source of the problem, Spencer believes that it is the school that has the negative effects on the youth.

Perhaps the largest problem with schools is their insistence on teaching subjects in

which many youth cannot succeed, and so then repeatedly fail. Subjects which fail to

interest youth and cause low grades can lead to damaged self confidence and tend to push

the student closer toward delinquency. To the many youths, the learning process can seem

irrelevant to the real world, and schools rarely relate the work to the outside world. If the

youth becomes sufficiently frustrated they may quit school, and obviously an unemployed

school drop out has a greater chance of becoming involved in youth crime. [1]

Spencer notes other problems such as the tendency of negative relationships to form

between school officials and a delinquent youth. If frequent negative interactions between

the youth and the teacher occur, mostly taking the form of harsh discipline, the youth may

turn toward the delinquent subculture for acceptance, and to rebuild self esteem. [2]

Spencer s article is clearly a message aimed at school officials to help them realize

the importance they hold in shaping youth s behavior. Because most school teachers see

delinquency as a socioeconomic problem, they take no action, and do not look for problems

or solutions within their classroom [3], and so in a sense become part of the problem.

Spencer concluded that delinquency is caused by many factors, but the school is

often an overlooked source. The first step to eliminate the schools as a contributing factor of

delinquency is for educators to realize their influence, and then to change education to better

suit each individual student s needs. This article is somewhat radical in the sense that it is

calling for major educational reform. In order for schools to combat delinquency, teachers

would have cater the curriculum to individual student interest, and relate subject material to

its real world application. Also schools and administrators would need to monitor

student-teacher relationships to ensure that students are not suffering from frequent negative

interactions. Above all, the curricula would have to provide a reasonable opportunity for

every student to succeed in some areas. (Spencer, 1977, p 24)

In Brownfield and Thompson s (1991) article, they discuss one of the more obvious

contributing factors to youth crime and delinquency, namely the influence of peers. Their

research investigates the effects of attachment to delinquent and non delinquent peers. Also,

they narrowed their investigation toward a group of friends versus a single best friend.

Brownfield and Thompson attempt to explain youth delinquency in terms of social

learning theory and social control theory. Because the theories are somewhat in

disagreement about explanations of behavior, the researchers attempted to discover which

theory better explains peer influence in delinquent behavior. Social learning theory

emphasizes peer influence especially through modeling and social reinforcement. In

contrast, social control theory downplays peer influence and sees the delinquent as isolated

and unable or unwilling to form close personal ties. [4]

Brownfield and Thompson investigated these principles via a questionnaire to

ascertain the respondent s level of delinquency and their relationship with peers. They found

that, consistent with social learning theory, that levels of peer involvement in delinquency

are positively correlated to one s own level of delinquency. [5] Also measures of attachment to

a best friend are not significantly associated to the respondent s level of delinquency, most

likely because relationships with a best friend are unconditional and will persist despite one s

level of criminality. Another trend which emerged was that those with delinquent friends are

significantly less likely to trust or respect these friends, than those with non delinquent

friends. These findings can be applied to members of youth gangs, as they have the ability

for a quality relationship with a single best friend, but the relationships found throughout the

gang are characterized by a lack of respect and trust, and held together only by external

threats. (Brownfield and Thompson, 1991, p 58)

Brownfield and Thompson s suggestion that delinquency among one s peers

increases a youth s chances of delinquency, but that these ties lack respect and trust, make

an intervention possible via new role models whom the youth could trust and respect.

Rankin and Wells (1990) realize that the variables causing youth crime are numerous and that attempts to explain a complex behavior in terms of a single source are limited in their usefulness. These researchers take into account both the variables of parental attachments or indirect control, as well as discipline or direct control when studying the family s effect on delinquency.

Rankin and Wells look to several theories to help them explain deviance and youth

crime. The idea that a youth may be attached to a parent, and will obey out of respect and

not wanting to offend them is the principle behind attachment and indirect control. The idea

that a youth will obey only to avoid a punishment or gain a reward is the premise behind a

direct control. No doubt that most parents use a combination of direct and indirect controls

when raising youth, and the effect of different combinations of controls on youth behavior

was the aim of the research.

Social learning theory would suggest that frequent punishments would encourage

delinquency, as these would effect the child s attachment to their parents. Learning theory

suggests that obedience is really only apparent when the youth has strong parental

attachments and may fear losing respect and trust. Youth may internalize the rules of their

parents and as suggested by social control theory, and in these cases punishments would

become unnecessary and only serve to encourage delinquency. [6]

Rankin and Wells study which involved analysis of the Youth in Transition data

panel collected by Bachman and associates (1978) found numerous trends of interest. For

direct control or discipline, it was found that greater discipline does not always lead to less

delinquency. What is key is the consistency in which discipline is used, as if a youth is

consistently punished, delinquency will be reduced. [7] Also a medium level of strictness was

found to reduce delinquent behavior, while responses which are either very high or low in

strictness will increase delinquency. Another finding indicated that punishments that

involved physical discipline such as slapping or spanking served mostly to increase

delinquency in proportion to the amount of punishment. [8]

When variables of parental attachment or indirect controls on delinquency are

examined, it was confirmed that youths that strongly identify with their parents show lower

levels of delinquency. When Rankin and Wells attempted to test the results of parental

attachment and consistency of punishment their results were less clear. At low levels of

attachment and consistency the result of high levels of delinquency held, as well as at high

levels of attachment and consistency the result of low levels of delinquency occurred.

However for various medium levels of attachment and consistency in discipline, the

relationship with delinquency was not always linear, leading Rankin and Wells to believe

that the variables operate independently of one another. [9]

While no intervention is suggested, the results of being very consistent when

punishing, or having a strong attachment with one s children seems to produce results of low

levels of delinquency. This information can be useful for helping control youth crime

through parental education.

Earnest s (1996) article on a treatment program that is operating successfully in

Alabama can help shed a positive light on possible interventions in youth crime. The

program is known as Community Intensive Treatment for Youth or CITY, and the results

have been so satisfactory that Earnest believes that it should be incorporated into juvenile

justice systems nation wide. [10] Youths join the program either voluntarily through a

diversion program, or as a condition of their disposition.

The CITY program is able to identify each adolescent s strengths and weaknesses,

and then alter their educational and natural environment to facilitate learning and discourage

inappropriate behaviors. The CITY program focuses on the problems of youth education,

ensuring that each participant completes high school, usually with grades high enough to

enroll in college. CITY is able provide individual and group counseling, as well as offering

rewards to assist in behavioral change. A critical element of the CITY program is their

constant evaluation of the youth s progress, as well as follow up visits for youth who have

graduated from the program.

CITY s success can be attributed to treating each individual as having distinct

problems, which responds to Spencer s (1977) claims of the school system s effect on

delinquency. By providing a controlled environment which limits inappropriate behaviors,

and consistently rewards positive behaviors, the CITY program follows Rankin and Wells

(1990) conclusions concerning consistency in punishment, as well as Brownfield and

Thompson s (1991) work surrounding peer influence and youth crime.

The CITY program has other benefits besides its seventy-two percent success rate, as

it is a cost effective alternative to incarceration. The cost per person per day for the CITY

program is $43.83 (US), while the cost per bed per day in a juvenile institution is more than

$120 (US). Plans of expanding CITY are in the works, as it stands out as a cost effective,

highly successful solution to youth crime offenders and juvenile delinquency.

Steward (1997) outlines Missouri s approach to dealing with youth offenders in his

article on the variety of programs offered to build self esteem and confidence. Missouri s

Division of Youth Service (DYS) has many facilities in operation to allow for treatment of

youth, while being close enough to incorporate the family into the rehabilitation process.

DYS programs begin with an individualized risk and needs assessment to determine

whether the youth would benefit from a residential or non-residential program. DYS has

developed a wide variety of services to meet the needs of juveniles. Citizen involvement is

important, as community liaison councils offer community feedback and address citizen

concerns. Youths are able to develop positive community relations through community

groups and activities such as through the Red Cross and the American Cancer Society. DYS

programs use a case management system for the youths to constantly evaluate their progress.

Family therapy, jobs programs, providing alternative living arrangements, and offering day

treatment for education and counseling are all available. Also, for youths who are unable to

function normally in a community setting, there are residential facilities ranging from secure

care to group homes.

What makes DYS programs successful is their initial risk and needs assessment to

identify the youth s problems, followed by a wide range of programs and follow up visits

and assessments after graduation from the program. Steward feels this program is worthy of

expansion due to its ability to modify programs to meet individual youth s needs, and its

unique approach of involving the family and community so fully in the rehabilitation

process. This program meets the concerns raised by Spencer (1977) to focus the educational

process on the individual s needs and interests, as well as Rankin and Wells (1990) and

Brownfield and Thompson s (1991) work on the influence of family and peers by providing

family therapy and alternative living arrangements.

In order to provide a quantitative evaluation of youth crime, the Canadian Juristats were consulted to examine the youth court statistics for 1994 and 1995. According to the Juristats half of the youth court cases in Canada involved property offenses, and to contrast only one in five are violent offenses – one half being minor assaults. The cases heard most often were theft under $1000 and break and enter. [11] This data is very useful in targeting what kinds of

crimes most youth are committing in order to develop effective crime prevention strategies.

Clearly with the majority of offenses being property oriented, interventions should focus

more on increased property lighting and neighborhood watch, rather than looking at deterring serious assaults as these are much less common.

According to the Juristats, offenses tend to vary by the age of the young offender. Theft under $1000, minor assault, and break and enter offenses were committed more often by 12 and 13 year olds, while on the other hand more serious offenses such as theft over $1000, drug offenses, possession of stolen property, and robbery tended to increase with age. [12] This information is useful because it allows for interventions to be geared toward each age group, in order to correct for the crimes mostly commonly associated with each. This data also shows that the majority of youth crime, most of which is property crime, is being committed by 16 and 17 year olds. Because youths tend to commit more crimes and more serious crimes as they age, early intervention should be a priority.

According to the Juristats, custody dispositions were the most common, as they represented 34% of the 73969 cases resulting in dispositions across Canada. Custody was most common for offenses involving importing or exporting drugs, murder or manslaughter, and escape from custody. [13] This data is useful as it shows the willingness of judges to impose a custody disposition, which is necessary for many of the youth correctional programs that have been proven to work. Perhaps another important finding is that judges are most likely to give a disposition of probation for property offenses, even though it is the form of youth crime that it committed the most. If dispositions of custody were given for these property offenses, especially break and enter, it would be easier to administer intervention programs.

After examining the problem of youth crime it becomes apparent that the root causes are diverse, and the symptoms are displayed in a variety of social conditions and crimes. Based on the research conducted, the major sources of youth crime appear to come from the educational system, parental control and peer influence. Intervention in the educational system would have to involve making student interest and success a priority, as well as ensuring that students feel accepted and belong, and that student-teacher relationships are healthy. These interventions would assist in dealing with the root causes of youth crime, but nevertheless youth crime will still exist in some proportion in the downtown cores. Based on the available statistics, the majority of youth crime in Canada is property crime. This would lead to interventions on the micro level of ensuring adequate street lighting, ensuring that doors and windows are locked on stores and vehicles, that valuables are not left unattended, as well as an increase in police patrols to help store owners look after their property. An intervention of this kind could be implemented with the assistance of the local police service, to help distribute information on preventing property crime in the downtown core, and to increase foot and automobile patrol.

End Notes

[1] Spencer, Gordon L. How schools contribute to delinquency. Youth Authority Quarterly. Department of the Youth Authority, Sacramento, 1977, Vol. 30 #1, Spring, pg. 24.

[2] Spencer, 25.

[3] Spencer, 25.

[4] Brownfield, David and Thompson, Kevin. Attachment to peers and delinquent behavior. Canadian

Journal of Criminology. Canadian Criminal Justice Association. January 1991, pg. 50.

[5] Brownfield and Thompson, 57.

[6] Rankin, Joseph H. and Wells, L. Edward. The Effect of Parental Attachments and Direct Controls on Delinquency. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency. Sage Publications Inc. 1990 Vol. 27, #2, p. 144.

[7] Rankin and Wells, 151.

[8] Rankin and Wells, 151.

[9] Rankin and Wells, 159.

[10] Earnest, Ed. Youth Day Treatment Program Works for Alabama. Corrections Today. American

Correctional Association Inc. Maryland. August 1996. pg. 70.

[11] Doherty, Glen and de Souza, Paul. Canadian Juristat Volume 16, Number 4. Statistics Canada. March 1996, pg. 4.

[12] Doherty, Glen and de Souza, Paul, 6.

[13] Doherty, Glen and de Souza, Paul, 9