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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Programs Used to Address Juvenile Intervention

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Abstract

This case study explored stakeholders' descriptions of best practices relative to intervention programs utilized in juvenile detention centers in the state of North Carolina. The populations for the study included stakeholders in the juvenile justice system. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and archival data files. Themes emerging from the study, leading to effective best practices, included (a) individualized programs, (b) group programs, and (c) family/parental involvement programs. Implications are for stakeholders, policymakers, and families of juvenile offenders.

Introduction

The number of young people under the age of 18 involved in crimes or actions subject to criminal liability, identified as juvenile delinquents, continues to be a concern for society and the court system in America. Increasing and improving facilities established to address the antisocial actions or any behaviors subject to criminal liabilities committed by young people, who are beyond their guardian's control, also remain a concern (Shaw & McKay, 2016). Eeren, Schawo, Scholte, Busschbach, and Hakkaart (2015) suggested intervention programs are critical components of any improvement because juvenile criminal activity continues to be a problem in the United States in terms of its financial burden to society and its effect on quality of life. The need for a critical review and evaluation of intervention programs by stakeholders, as related to juvenile delinquency, has become increasingly significant with the upsurge in re-offenders (Shaw & McKay, 2016).

Juvenile intervention programs are implemented to help strengthen families, life, and communication skills, to reduce child abuse and the likelihood of an adolescent's involvement in the juvenile court system (Durham System of Care, 2017). Smith (2017) defined an intervention to delinquency as programs focusing on target areas affecting youth. Target areas are concentrated provinces of high crime and disadvantaged low-income communities suffering from disparities in health, high unemployment, and educational illiteracy contributing to youth victimization and a life of crime (Hahn, 2017). Effective resources, training, and programs are necessary to target areas with a high concentration of criminal activity and reduce delinquency. Intervention programs, specific to juveniles, must be effective and yield positive outcomes for system dynamics to change (Jannetta & Okeke, 2017). Smith (2017) indicated intervention programs should focus on reducing delinquency, target communities with high juveniledelinquency, and improve completion of these programs.

Background

The lack of best practices regarding effective policies and programs designed to address juvenile intervention programs for youth in North Carolina, contribute to youth ending up in the juvenile system and increases the possibility of adult criminality, resulting in increased societal crime rates, potentially increasing social expenses (Eeren et al., 2015). This study was conducted to explore and obtain deeper insights into stakeholders' perceptions of best practices regarding intervention programs for juvenile offenders and how stakeholders describe the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of such programs to achieve program purposes. In view of the increasing juvenile delinquent population, examining, exploring, and understanding stakeholders' perceptions about juvenile delinquent programs in the United States, specifically in North Carolina, may help leaders determine where the focus on intervention should be to improve program success. Data from the study may also suggest effective strategies for decreasing juvenile delinquency within some counties in North Carolina.

Stakeholders typically include counselors, case managers, program coordinators, social workers, judges, teachers, and juvenile court facilitators who interact with at-risk youth. According to Shaw and McKay (2016), one step in addressing the need may include stakeholders collaborating to decide which intervention programs yield best results in their respective

communities. Intervention programs are less expensive, can reduce the financial burden on communities, and decrease juvenile delinquency (Eeren et al., 2015). When juvenile delinquency programs are evaluated and managed effectively, there are more positive outcomes (Eeren et al., 2015).

Assessing historical perspectives allows policy makers and leaders to develop and implement educational and precise rules and policies which may affect change. Having knowledge of historical research provides pertinent insights relative to past programs for future research-based programs (Bogers, Chesbrough, & Moedas, 2018). Historical explanations identify strategies stakeholders may use to determine the significance education and intervention have in improving policies and positive change for youth and society (Meulman, Reymen, Podoyntsyna, & Romme, 2018).

During the 1950s, juvenile crime in the United States was viewed as a national problem because violent crimes committed by youth were increasing (Gilbert, 1986; Surette, 2002). American legislators began to look to citizens for opinions concerning the youth delinquency problem. In 1952, the Children's Bureau established a temporary project known as the Special Delinquency Project to address delinquency (Cross, 2003). The Special Delinquency Project focused on assisting organizations and law enforcement to provide programs for youth offenders to address behaviors such as larceny, breaking and entering, smoking, and under-age drinking. The purpose of the project was to increase the role of social workers, psychiatric experts, and the children's court system (Gilbert, 1986). Even though the program was temporary, state and local organizations began to address the increase in deviant juvenile behaviors.

The Special Delinquency Project addressed the need to provide psychiatric evaluations and mental health programs to juveniles. In the Supreme Court case, *Kent vs. United States* (383 US. 541, 1966) a 14-year-old, Kent Morris, was detained for breaking and entering, theft, larceny, and a sex crime against another person. After a psychiatric evaluation, mental health officials determined the juvenile suffered from a psychological disorder. This psychological diagnosis allowed the juvenile to receive proper mental health services, known as an intervention preventive program (de Voursney & Huang, 2016).

Theoretical Considerations

Policies and programs evolved throughout the 1960s and 1980s as fathers being sent to the Vietnam War created a decrease in parental supervision and an increase in delinquent behavior, drug use, children running away from home, and sexual promiscuity (Elder, 2018; Jenson & Howard, 1998). Because of delinquent behaviors, Adult Youth Programs (AYP) such as hotlines, free clinics, and runaway houses were developed to address needs of youth (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Although somewhat neglected, because of decreased funding, programs such as AYP still exist (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Stakeholders reviewed the intentions of historical programs to implement new programs designed to produce positive changes in youth behavior (Ghate, 2018). The aim of reforming juvenile programs during the 1960s to 1970s was to control and discipline youth of lower classes in hopes of re-socializing boys and girls to accept the ideology of capitalism (Liazos, 1974).

Historically, juvenile justice policy oscillated between rehabilitative and punitive approaches to manage youth offenders (Jensen & Howard, 1998). Policies and practices of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized individual treatment for young offenders in non-secure, community-based programs (OJJCP, 1996). As violent youth crimes increased during this era, there was a renewed interest in punishing delinquents. Cyclic fluctuations in juvenile justice policy and relationships to policy, practice, and youth crime were examined (Snyder, 1999). Crime rates have remained stable over the past three decades and are independent of prevailing juvenile justice policies (Snyder, 1999). During the 1980s, there was an increasing need to develop intervention and prevention programs to reduce juvenile delinquency.

Literature Review

The increase in youth crime, stories of frustrated parents seeking help for troubled children, and criticisms of juvenile justice programs led to demands for change in how young offenders are charged, punished, and treated (Howell, Krisberg, & Jones, 1995). Butterfield (1996) stated public concerns about violent juvenile crime were at an unprecedented high between the 1970s and 1980s. Policies implemented programs, which emphasized rehabilitation versus punishment. The violent nature of youth crime and the escalating number of young people in the juvenile justice system challenged the system guiding policies and practices of youth offenders (Jensen & Howard, 1998). Thus, the expansion of programs involved multiple agencies and the family.

During the 1990s, Youth involved with the juvenile justice system demonstrated needs that required the attention of other programs and services such as mental health, alcohol, drug use, child welfare, and other social services (Cronin, 1996). Juvenile assessment centers were centralized single-entry points to provide intake and assessment services for youth who had contact with the justice system (Oldenettel & Wordes, 2000). Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer, and Schaible (2006) identified contributory factors associated with juvenile criminal activity to include poor to no parental supervision, no discipline, and the inattentiveness of the parent-child relationship. Findings from a study by Simons, Lu, Conger, Lorenz, and Frederick (1994) derived from four waves of data collected based on 177 adolescent boys living in a small town in the Midwest supports the concept of juvenile assessment centers. This study examined criminal activity by boys between the ages of 4-13 (early starters) and adolescents between the ages of 14-18 (late starters) with parents. Parental involvement with children has been proven to reduce deviant behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) stated “Family factors never operated in a vacuum, but instead took place with other factors such as the community, the school system, economic, and cultural circumstances of cities” (p. 128). Parental conflict and parental aggressiveness predicted violent youth behavior, while lack of maternal affection, and paternal criminality predicted involvement in misdemeanor crimes (McCord, 1980).

Cronin (1996) explored the effect of harsh corporal punishment and equality of parental involvement of three adolescent outcomes: aggressiveness, delinquency, and psychological well-being. Measures of parental behavior collected during the first three years of the study were used to predict adolescent adjustments in the fourth year. The study concluded that the quality of parental involvement showed significant associations with adolescent positive outcomes; and

corporal punishment was not related to positive outcomes when the effects of parental involvement was removed (Simons et al., 1994). Most parents in the United States supported the principle of corporal punishment and used such methods to discipline their children (Straus & Gelles, 1988; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). However, intervention and prevention programs had a greater effect in reducing juvenile delinquency in comparison to corporal punishment. The focus was placed on early intervention of juvenile delinquency instead of corporal punishment (Gatti, 1998).

Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer, and Schaible (2006) identified contributory factors associated with juvenile criminal activity to include poor to absence of parental supervision, no discipline, and the inattentiveness of the parent-child relationship. Family conditions associated with deviant behavior were more serious than social issues which meant juveniles appeared to engage in deviant behaviors because there was a weak or nonexistent link in the family structure. The interactions between the parent and child, and how parents supervised children affected whether youth would engage in deviant behaviors (Simons, Simons, & Wallace, 2004).

Juvenile intervention programs, historically, had been widespread to combat the proliferation of delinquency. Many programs have been ineffective. Intervention programs gained a significant amount support through media, policy, lobbyist, and politicians (Young, 2018). The implementation of programs such the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), McGruff (The Crime Dog), diversion military boot camps, jails, and the Scared Straight program were practices for benchmarking turn around opportunities relative to rehabilitating juvenile delinquents (Sharkey, Stifel, & Mayworm, 2015).

Effective intervention played an essential role in strategies designed to decrease rates of juvenile delinquency (Donges, 2015; Mallet, 2016; NIJ & OJJDP, 2014; Young, Geer, & Church, 2017). As part of continuing efforts to address the problem, the Post Arrest Diversion (PAD) program was implemented. PAD is a diversion program provided systematic, standardized screening assessments, individualized case plans, extensive referral services, case management, and follow-up services, decreased delinquency (Whitehead & Lab, 2001).

Findings from the study contributed to the current body of knowledge within the juvenile delinquency field of study. By exploring stakeholders' perceptions, data obtained may include insights into policy and program development with the potential of supporting the development, revision, and redesign of programs. Data from the study may also serve as a tool for the evaluation of intervention programs in North Carolina as well as other U.S states. The evaluation of programs may support the review of the effectiveness of projects, policies, and programs for more effective decision-making, which could better serve youths and communities affected by their delinquency (Gibbs, 2018). Additionally, findings from the study served as a valuable resource for juvenile delinquency practitioners, administrators, parents, educators, and government agencies via highlighting knowledge regarding the value of recognizing risk factors and implementing preventive measures through awareness, early intervention, and effective program design (Gibbs, 2018). The study may serve as a prototype for other states and communities to set benchmarks for outcomes of programs and establish systems for ongoing evaluations within their jurisdiction.

Method

Juvenile intervention programs are lacking effective policies and procedures needed to identify, investigate, and regulate risk factors associated with juvenile delinquency and lead to more youth ending up in the juvenile justice system. Additionally, ineffective juvenile intervention practices increase the possibility of adult criminality, result in higher crime rates, and increase cost to the community (Eeren et al., 2015; MacKenzie & Farrington, 2015). Single case study design was effective to gain and interpret perspectives of individuals' beliefs, involvements, and acknowledgement of viewpoints of persons affiliated with that phenomenon and guaranteed the exploration and better understanding (Lehmann et al., 2019). The study was underpinned by the Cognitive Behavior theory and the Social Learning theory.

Setting and sample. The current study took place in the state of North Carolina and involved participants and data relevant to programs and services provided for youth in the sub-urban, rural, and urban areas of the state. Stakeholders were invited to participate in the study via posters and flyers posted on bulletin boards in the court buildings and via internal communication newsletters. Participants in the study were individuals who worked directly with youths in the juvenile justice system. The invitation to take part in the study clearly outlined that participants must be 21 years of age and over and (a) a certified case manager, social worker, judge, program coordinator or a juvenile court counselor or facilitator that work directly with juvenile delinquents, (b) a teacher with experience in education and intervention programs with juvenile delinquent children between the ages of 6 and 18 for at least one year or more, (c) a participant in leadership and policy professional trainings relative to intervention programs within the past year, and (d) currently employed in the North Carolina juvenile justice system. Purposive sampling ensured that only participants who met the criteria and could contribute meaningfully to the study were included.

Participant characteristics. Thirty volunteers participated in the study and the length of direct experience ranged between 7 and 30 years in juvenile delinquency work. Six participants were involved in face-to-face interviews, including one Caucasian and five African Americans, all with a bachelor's degree or higher. Participants for the interviews ranged in age from 30 to 60 years and included two district judges, a social worker, two program coordinators, and a juvenile court employee. The educational level for interview participants ranged from bachelors to master's degrees.

Twenty-four participants were involved in the three focus groups with 8 participants per group. The educational levels for focus group participants ranged from bachelor to doctorate degrees and the age range for those participating in the focus groups was from 29 to 60 years. Seventy-five percent of participants in focus group 1 were African Americans and 25% were Caucasian. Participants ranged in age from 30-55 years, 75% were females, and 25% were males. Additionally, 75% of participants in focus group 1 were licensed, 50% had at least a master's degree, and their positions in the court system included social workers, a teacher, a case manager, a juvenile court counselor, a program coordinator, and a district judge. In focus group 2, 88% were African American and 12% were Caucasian. The ages of participants in focus group 2 ranged from 29-47 years. The group was composed of 38% females and 62% males; 63% of the participants were licensed and had at least a bachelor's degree. Positions held by participants

included, social workers, teachers, counselors and district judges. Focus group 3 participants were similar in characteristics as focus groups 1 and 2. The uniqueness of this focus group was that it included a Hispanic population. The group consisted of 36% African American, 52% Caucasian, and 12% Hispanic, and ranged in age from 30-47 years. Fifty percent of the group was female and 50% was male. All participants in this group were social workers and all had a bachelors or higher degree. All precautions for confidentiality were taken.

Written notes and audio recordings were taken during interviews and focus group meetings and data were coded and transcribed following each action of data collection. Stakeholders presented data during each interview, and the focus groups facilitated more discussion based on questions related to addressing youth needs, program resources, and issues that leads to juvenile delinquency. Use of focus groups allowed the researcher to collect a large amount of information from a diverse group of stakeholders. Participants from similarly situated positions in the organizations and were afforded the opportunity to articulate their point of views objectively (Boske et al., 2019). Sixteen open-ended questions were used for face-to-face interviews (See Appendix A) and the focus group discussions were guided by six open-ended questions (See Appendix B) during the data collection process.

Data Analysis. The current case study used content analysis for the development of themes, analysis of emergent themes, and triangulation of data for an improved exploration to code perceptions stakeholders hold regarding juvenile delinquency and intervention programs. The study was limited to professionals employed in the juvenile justice program from North Carolina and sought to answer three research questions asking (1) how did stakeholders describe the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of juvenile delinquency programs and services in the North Carolina juvenile court system; (2) how stakeholders define best practices relative to policies and components of juvenile delinquency programs and services; and (3) what stakeholders attributed the success or failure of intervention programs to reducing antisocial actions by youth and the rate of re-offenders.

Nvivo and Microsoft Excel. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and NVivo12 software. Microsoft Excel was used to organize data and NVivo12 software helped identify patterns, and themes that emerged during the data collected. Methods such as organizing, systematizing, and analyzing information were pertinent to ensure the findings presented valuable insights. Detailed hand-written notes were useful in the organization, visualization, development, and understanding of emergent themes and patterns. The compilation of data included the interpretation of perceptions of stakeholders within juvenile delinquency programs in North Carolina, a compilation of study conclusions, and the development of recommendations. NVivo software supported categorizing, structuring, and analyzing transcribed data and the organization of the conclusions (Nut & Bolts, 2017).

Bracketing. The use of bracketing helped to alleviated harmful effects of subjectivity that could have tainted the research process (Dorfler & Stierand, 2018). Bracketing was used to protect the researcher from the increasing effects of scrutinizing what was ardently a thought-provoking process. Bracketing supported the truthful and vigilant recording and reporting of study results and interpretations without the researcher's personal views, thoughts, beliefs, and predictions (Dorfler & Eden, 2017; Jun et al., 2017).

Triangulation. The triangulation process allowed opportunities for demonstrating a degree of impartiality during analysis of findings. Analysis of archival records also helped to eliminate bias (Mackieson et al., 2019) and was helpful for in depth understanding of history and policies involved with the juvenile delinquency system that were discussed by participants. As described by Hussein (2015) triangulation as a data analysis process helped to enhance rigor in the current qualitative research.

Findings

The study was limited to juvenile justice program professionals from North Carolina. The researcher sought to gain insights into how stakeholders describe the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of juvenile delinquency programs and services in the North Carolina juvenile court system; how stakeholders define best practices relative to policies and components of juvenile delinquency programs and services; and what stakeholders attributed the success or failure of intervention programs to reducing antisocial actions by youth and the rate of re-offenders. NVivo 12 software supported the identification and categorization of recurring theme, words, and phrases. The triangulation of data from interviews, focus groups, and archival records led to the recognition of programs designed for early intervention and mental health support for individuals and families. This resulted in the identification of best practices and major intervention strategies for individualized programs, group programs, and family/parental involvement programs. Three best practices revealed from the current study include:

1) Individual Programs. Individual programs have been found to be powerful tools in the efforts to reduce juvenile delinquency and repeat criminal activities. The effectiveness of coaching and mentoring in inspiring and motivating youths who were at risk to criminal activity and potentially at risk for dropping out of school was highlighted by Young et al.(2017). Mentoring and coaching have similar purposes because both provide one-on-one support to youth and enhance success for youth. Results from the current study supported the findings from earlier research asserting mentoring programs that include on-going and evolving activities supported by adult volunteers, education staff or organizations often leads to the achievement of positive goals. Coaching, for instance, involved placing youth in sports where one was able to assess the child's need, develop a foundational structure for the future, and be the positive support needed to redirect the youth's life from delinquency to a life of being responsible. As so eloquently stated by one participant, "Mentoring and coaching were designed to build trust, tailor the activities to the youth's need, and to ensure positive outcomes are achieved."

Findings from the study supports earlier research which suggested that in many cases youth must be handled individually. Participants agreed that individual case programs affect youth differently. Thus, as a best practice, programs such as counseling, anger management, technology and life skills activities should be assigned individually according to the youth's needs. Individual programs tend to be structured to serve the needs of youth designed to develop more self-esteem in youth, required innovative strategies, supportive school staff, and excellent alternative education programs to get youth back on target. Individual program coordinators

acknowledged issues youth face. Youth that had social problems, lacked education, was exposed to difficult life situations, experienced problems in the home or have been involved in the criminal justice system benefited from individual cases. Individual case programs were the fourth most utilized program for youth success. Participants advised that when individual case programs were matched appropriately to youth based on needs, the remarkably increased participation and completions revealed significant positive effects and outcomes in the juvenile population.

2) Group programs. The use of group programs such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Project Outreach program, Juvenile Detention, and the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council (JCPC) programs promote youth academic success. Participants reported that group programs promoted social skills and ensured the daily lives of youth were fun and nurturing. Further, group program provided and enhanced tutoring skills, built character through peer mentors, sports, designed health activities, and provided free meals for youth.

Results from the current study supports earlier findings that group programs such as the Boys and Girls Club, the Project Outreach program, Juvenile Detention, and JCPC programs; promoted youth academic success. Participants reported that group programs promoted social skills and ensured the daily lives of youth were fun and nurturing. Further, group programs provided and enhanced tutoring skills, built character through peer mentors, sports, designed health activities, and provided free meals for youth. One group program proven to decrease delinquency is detention center programs.

When stakeholders in Juvenile Detention collaborate and emphasize effective programs for youth, the end result is positive behavior and increased social and productive communication skills among youth. Group programs such as the JCPC's is a monitoring council that maintained accountability of youth's data by tracking education, school discipline, recidivism, attendance, program success, program effectiveness, program compliance, staff vacancies, referrals to court system, funding, and concerns with youth entering the system. Group programs such as the JCPC resource program were one of the leading program assessment council in North Carolina because the council assessed factors that contributed to delinquency, identified the resources needed to curtail the risks factors, and obtained the assistance youth needed to decrease or eliminate delinquency.

3) Family/parental Involvement Programs. Decreasing the likelihood of youth engaging in delinquent behavior was the goal of the Department of Public Safety for Juvenile Services. Family and parents of youth were held responsible for the detainment and arrest of deviant youth; however, the agency worked with parents and improved the behaviors of youth. According to one of the participants "the structure of the family in the United States changed considerably over the last 40-50 years". Several participants stated that "family structures changed to include increased single parent homes, increased teen pregnancy, nonparent family homes which led to foster care, and an increase in children living in non-wedded relationships included some of the families served. Engaging families in their child's programs promoted safety, stability, and increased the comfort of youth with parents and family members which aided in successful outcomes.

Early intervention programs, involvement in schools and policies with effective programs focused on the success and development of at-risk youth are proven effective. Utilizing early intervention programs when the youth deviant behaviors were minor were proven to benefit the child, the family, and schools. Research results indicated that these family/parent involved programs are important and cost-effective and have great impacts such as strengthening and empowering youth in the home and in school. Wood and Bauman (2017) found that when parents get involved in school programs, youth participation can increase significantly. For minorities and children of color involved in the juvenile system, early intervention was important because youth from minority backgrounds often experienced racial and social disparities in schools (McCoy & Pearson, 2019).

Recommendations

In addition to the best three practices outlined, it is worth mentioning that when laws are in place to prevent this type of treatment, measures were facilitated to ensure equality existed for all children. Constructive early experiences were essential fundamentals that yielded success in school, the home, and the community. Programs for young children at risk for developmental and educational delays were shown to positively impact outcomes across academics, ability to communicate, enhance cognitive development and social/emotional development. Children with mental health needs oftentimes entered the juvenile court system ill-equipped to assist them. Information was shared among practitioners of youth who was arrested each year in North Carolina suffered from a mental health disorder. Without Mental Health Support and treatment programs, youth had a direct path to delinquency and possibly an adult life of crime. Increasing adequate assessments and screenings leading to referring youth to Mental Health Support programs are also a best practice for consideration.

Results from the current study exploratory qualitative case study highlighted the participants' opinions and experiences and provided pertinent information for policymakers, community leaders, schools, families, the juvenile courts in North Carolina. Highly informed leaders with transformational and servant leadership characteristics are needed to guide and protect the direction of the juvenile justice system in North Carolina and the rest of the country. Findings point to the need to build collaborative and integrated systems for the task at hand. Leaders responsible for individual programs, group programs, and programs involving parents at all levels must possess collaborative skills to assist in implementing and maintaining effective programs that address the needs of all youth who are at-risk to delinquency, and those who come in contact with the court system. Transformational leadership should incorporate characteristics that are deemed to inspire, motivate, and provide program structure for community leaders, families, and schools that will continue to reduce juvenile delinquency (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Findings from this study, suggested that best practices, when used to develop and implement effective programs, were proven to reduce delinquency and address the needs of youth. Results demonstrated that developing partnerships among stakeholders who had direct contact with juveniles was vital for implementing effective programs that addressed the many factors that contributed to delinquency. Results of this study may help policymakers and direct-contact stakeholders by providing information regarding best practices and programs proven to reduce deviant behaviors and support juvenile justice.

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