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Crime Prevention: A Best Practices Approach

Introduction

Rutherford B. Hayes once said that "crimes increase as education, opportunity, and property decrease. Whatever spreads ignorance, poverty, and discontent causes crime." Although crime rates have declined substantially since the 1980s, as cities continue to grow, so too does crime in urban areas. While many neighborhoods are largely crime-free, most crimes occur in low-income, predominantly minority, urban neighborhoods.

In many major cities across the United States, the "solution" to the crime problem has been to increase police presence generally or within a specific area defined as high crime. However, in attempting to solve the crime problem, particular policies have inadvertently created other social problems. America's imprisonment binge, one outcome of the war on crime, has left many children emotionally, financially, and physically impoverished.[1,2,3] Large numbers of individuals have been removed from their communities, yet justice policies have neglected to prepare for the eventual return of these individuals to the community.[4] Here, we adopt a social problems approach and examine best practices in addressing crime, including prevention, intervention, and post-incarceration programs that attempt to reduce crime and enhance public safety.

Populations at Risk & Scope of the Problem

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in the United States "[u]rban households have historically been and continue to be the most vulnerable to property crime, burglary, motor vehicle theft and theft."[5] However, it is the concentration of poverty, rather than simply geography, that likely accounts for the spatial distribution of crime in our urban centers.[6] In particular, low-income, high-poverty areas have the highest risk for both property and violent/personal victimization. Debatably more damaging is the neighborhood context this creates, providing a ripe environment for the development of new youth offenders.

Distressed urban areas often lack quality schools, severely limiting the resources and opportunities available to youth. Low educational attainment increases the probability of delinquency, as does low parental educational attainment.[7] In large measure, individuals who drop out of high school have higher rates of criminal involvement;[8] in fact, three quarters of all inmates in state prison are high school dropouts.[9]

While racial and ethnic minorities, especially youth, of low socioeconomic status (SES) are at a higher risk for victimization than their white counterparts, some of the largest racial/ethnic disparities appear in arrest rates.[10] According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the 2005 rate of imprisonment for African Americans was over six times that of whites, and more than twice the rate for Hispanics; in turn, the incarceration rate for Hispanics was 2.6 times that of whites.[11]

Finally, in spite of recent reports suggesting the emergence of a new female criminal, the unshakable relationship between gender and crime remains an almost universal truth in criminology.[12] Simply being male is a risk factor for both crime perpetration and victimization.[13]

Despite geographical concentration, crime is nevertheless ubiquitous; it impacts all individuals, families, and neighborhoods, either directly through victimization or indirectly through neighborhood effects, fear of crime, or a strain on the economy. Yet, like Mark Twain's death, the rumors over the past two decades of an impending wave of violent crime have been greatly exaggerated. All seven of the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Index Crimes declined during the 1990s.[14] Currently, national crime rates are on a steady, five-year decline. In 2006, in cities with a population over 250,000, the violent crime rate was 936.7 per 100,000 residents, whereas the property crime rate for the same year was 4631.5 per 100,000.[15] Thus, it is property crime, rather than violent crime, that drives overall crime rates for cities—a problem better suited to social prevention rather than incarceration.

The 2006 violent crime rate for the City of Dallas was 1206.2 per 100,000 population, while the property crime

rate was 6857.1.[16] Yet a mere handful of the city's more than 900 block groups are driving these elevated numbers, with crime rates more than 33 times the overall city average.[17] Dallas doesn't have a crime problem—it has a hotspot problem, one that can be addressed through targeted, community-based interventions and policing.

Components of Successful Programs

While no combination of factors ensures success for a crime prevention or intervention program, a number of elements characterize the nation's most successful initiatives. In general, best practice programs in addressing crime involve:

- Collaboration and partnerships between multiple agencies/organizations (state, local, federal, and community)
- Cultural sensitivity to the needs of different groups (gender, racial/ethnic, SES)
- A reliance on evidence-based practice and research to inform programmatic goals and curriculum
- Multifaceted approaches that involve a social-problems orientation to crime to address multiple levels of risk
- Community participation and buy-in
- Positive mentoring experiences
- Parental involvement—one of the most effective forms of intervention in the prevention of youth crime
- Situational crime prevention and policing to target hotspots

Best & Promising Practices

Undeniably, the relative success of crime *prevention* programs, as opposed to increasing arrests or exacting harsher penalties, rests on their ability to systematically eliminate various forms of crime and strengthen the community, which proves difficult to measure.[18] Notwithstanding the complexity of assessing and defining "success" or measuring the degree to which criminal behavior is absent, both research and practice point to a number of interventions and programs that show promise in reducing crime.

Perry Preschool

Home visitation programs and early education programs, such as the Nurse-Family Partnership and Head Start, have been shown to have a demonstrable impact on delinquency later in the lifecourse. Next to Head Start, the Perry Preschool Project is likely one of the most evaluated early childhood programs shown to have a clear effect on delinquent behavior. Notably, it combines a visitation model with high-quality education, targeting at-risk children. Almost half of the children in Perry Preschool came from families utilizing public assistance, 47% of the families were headed by single parents, and 40% of the parents were unemployed.[19]

Follow-ups at age 19 indicate that total arrests for the Perry Preschool group were one third lower than arrest figures for the control group (with similar demographic characteristics); moreover, the study group had a 50% lower likelihood of being arrested for a serious offense.[20] The Perry Preschool students were also less likely than the control group to be involved in a serious violent physical altercation or gang fight, cause physical harm to another that required hospitalization, or have contact with the police.[21,22]

By age 27, Perry Preschool graduates still had a lower average number of lifetime and adult arrests, and were significantly less likely than the control group (7% vs. 35%) to have become chronic offenders with five or more arrests.[23] Remarkably, at age 40, participants maintained lower representation in arrests for drug, property, and violent offenses than the control group.[24] In addition, 55% of the non-participant group had been arrested five or more times, compared to 36% for the Perry Preschoolers; for those who were arrested, the average sentence length and time served were significantly lower for program participants than the non-participant group.[25] Overall, on a number of indicators of life success, Perry Preschool students appear to outperform their control group peers.

Functional Family Therapy

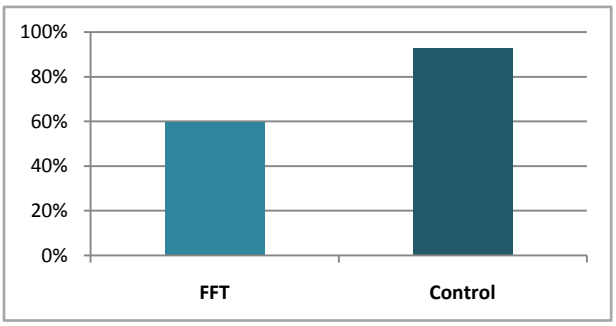
The Functional Family Therapy (FFT) program represents one of the most cost-effective means of reducing repeat delinquency in juvenile offenders—reestablishing the health of the primary family unit.[26] Developed in 1969, FFT utilizes a multidimensional clinical model of family intervention that is adaptive, individualized, and culturally sensitive.[27] FFT requires practitioners (therapists and family counselors) to develop a three-stage intervention process, tailored to the needs of individual families with at-risk children. The phases include:

- Engagement and motivation
- Behavior modification
- Generalization, so that families can apply the techniques to multiple settings and problems they encounter[28]

Evaluations of the approach demonstrate that "when compared with standard juvenile probation services,

residential treatment, and alternative therapeutic approaches, FFT is highly successful," and even reduced the delinquency of participants' siblings.[29,30] Other evaluations produce similar positive findings. As Figure 1 demonstrates, recidivism rates for the control group were one third higher than for the FFT group in one study.

Figure 1. Recidivism Rates for FFT Youth Compared to Control Group Youth[31]



Operation Ceasefire

Sherman et al.'s review of what works in fighting crime established that extra police patrols in hotspots serve as an effective measure to reduce crime.[32] An approach adopting the hotspot policing strategy is Operation Ceasefire, a program aimed at reducing youth homicide and gang and gun violence. Developed in Boston and sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the program fundamentally involved "pulling levers," or focusing directly on *deterrence strategies* specific to gang violence, and capitalizing on existing relationships as well as forming new ones, in such a way that the program would be guaranteed support within the community.

Initially, the intervention addressed the most urgent problems of the city, attempting to cool off hotspots of gang violence and intervene in illicit firearms markets.[33] Following this, the program targeted the most dangerous and violent offenders in the city in an effort to remove individuals responsible for a large proportion of the city's violence problem. Although only a promising practice, "[a]fter Operation Ceasefire started in mid-1996, youth homicides in Boston dropped dramatically and did not increase for about five years."[34] The subsequent increase coincided with the abandonment of the intervention, which had been credited with a 63% reduction in youth homicide in the city.[35]

The Safer Foundation

Although the rising incarceration rate has slowed in recent years, still more than 5.9 million individuals were on parole or probation at the state, local, or federal level in 2005. Moreover, 95% of those currently in prison will eventually be released.[36] Reentry programs, especially in urban areas characterized by a disproportionately high population of ex-offenders, offer promise in assisting formerly incarcerated persons to readjust to life after incarceration while simultaneously preventing recidivism.

One of the principal difficulties encountered by ex-offenders upon release is finding stable and well-paying employment. Job and life skills training, such as that provided by the Safer Foundation, improves employability, thus reducing recidivism rates.[37] The core components of the program include:

- Outreach, intake, and assessment
- Educational offerings
- Job placement
- Follow-up[38]

On average, the Safer Foundation places ex-offenders in gainful employment within 3 weeks of referral. In 1996, Chicago's Safer Foundation helped 1,102 clients find employment, and almost 60% were still employed after 30 days. After 180 days, only one participant who completed the program was convicted of a new crime, indicating a significant reduction in recidivism.[39] While longitudinal data does not exist to substantiate the program as a best practice, initial results suggest that it holds promise in addressing the reentry problem.

Conclusion

Crime rates serve as a key indicator of quality of life. In addition to the immediate impact on victims, individuals and families living in high-crime areas are subjected to a general sense of fear as well as reduced investment in their communities. Moreover, the perception of crime as a city-wide problem has consequences for the larger regional economy. While there are no absolute solutions to the crime problem in Dallas or other urban areas, identifying risk factors and the communities that are most debilitated by crime is the first step toward crime prevention.

Crime is not an *inevitable* consequence of city life or poverty or a lack of education; rather, it is the culmination of multiple risk factors and opportunities lost. Thus, a best practices approach to preventing crime requires that the focus be taken away from crime itself. After years of studying "the crime problem," it has become abundantly clear that crime is merely a symptom of larger social problems and is inextricably linked to concentrated poverty, poor education, and family and neighborhood conditions. Nevertheless, even as crime is a result of systemic conditions, a reduction in crime alone can stimulate a reversal of these conditions; it can spur neighborhood revitalization and renewal, as well as

investment in businesses and infrastructure within the community, thereby having a much more profound effect on quality of life than simply decreasing crime. [40]

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The J. McDonald Williams Institute takes a holistic approach to understanding and examining the complex issues faced by the residents of distressed urban communities, applying that understanding to generate lasting revitalization across all dimensions of quality of life.

Full best practices reports are being developed to accompany the Institute's Wholeness Index, and will be available in early 2008 at www.wholenessindex.org

The J. McDonald Williams Institute was established by the Foundation for Community Empowerment (FCE) in 2005 as a source of objective research and policy recommendations relevant to urban revitalization and quality of life.

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