

Scientifically valid prevention programs cut rates of juvenile delinquency

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Seventh-grade students in U.S. communities that have set up scientifically validated programs to reduce juvenile delinquency have a significantly smaller chance of engaging such behavior than do children in towns that have not adopted such programs.

Students in 12 Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Oregon, Utah and Washington towns that installed such prevention programs were 27 percent less likely to be involved in delinquency than were students in 12 matched towns in those states that didn't set up programs, according to a new University of Washington study published this week in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

The early finding comes from the Community Youth Development Study that is tracking the behavior of more than 4,400 students for five years in the 12 pairs of small-to moderate-size towns. The data come from the third year of the study, which is continuing.

"This finding is very important because early initiation of delinquent behavior in children before the age of 14 is a predictor of later substance abuse, chronic criminal behavior and mental health problems," said J. David Hawkins, lead author and director of the study. "It is exciting because we didn't expect to find these community-wide effects until about five years. The seventh grade is still pretty young and this may bode well for other behavioral outcomes."

The study is being conducted by the UW's Social Development Research

Group, a part of the School of Social Work, with funding from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Cancer Institute, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Mental Health and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

At the start of the study, all fifth-grade students in the 24 cities filled out questionnaires that included questions about delinquent behavior, asking for example whether they had stolen anything worth more than \$5, purposely damaged or destroyed property that didn't belong to them or attacked someone with the intent of causing seriously harm. The questionnaires administered again when the students were in the sixth and seventh grades.

The study is an experimental test of the Communities That Care program developed by the Social Development Research Group. To set up the study, the researchers recruited and matched 12 pairs of cities by population, racial and ethnic diversity, crime rates and other factors. One city in each pair was randomly chosen to test Communities That Care and received training over the first year in how to implement it and build a supportive community coalition.

Part of the training included a process for each town to identify its risk factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency. Once these were identified, the communities were asked to select between two and five of them as their top priorities. After that they were given information about tested programs that addressed each priority risk factor, selected programs they would implement and were trained in how to implement these programs. The other cities were given no assistance.

"Communities That Care is designed to empower communities to collect and use data on the risks their children face, and also on strength of the community, and then use this information to choose prevention and early intervention programs that have been tested and shown to be effective,"

said Hawkins.

"Historically, this country has believed in building coalitions to deal with youth problems in a community, but they haven't been shown to be effective. What's exciting is that this demonstrates that if you provide a community coalition with the skills and tools of prevention science, that coalition can help its kids actually avoid delinquent behavior. We can use the resources of a community to solve its problems by working smarter."

Data from the study showed the intervention community's programs had little effect in reducing the number of children who began using cigarettes, alcohol, drugs and other substances by the end of the seventh grade. This was expected, according to Hawkins, because most young people initiate substance use at an older age.

Source: University of Washington

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