

Delinquent Adolescent Behavior

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Statement of the problem

“Juvenile crime is a significant problem in the United States, and in 2013 juvenile courts oversaw a little over 1 million delinquency cases” (Evans, 2016) is just one of the many disheartening facts that was discovered in this research. For my research, I decided to look into adolescent delinquent behavior and the various programs out there that can help improve such behavior. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines delinquency as “usually [a] young person who regularly performs illegal or immoral acts” (Delinquent, n.d.). This definition covers a span of behavior including risky behavior such as substance use, violent behavior, aggression, and recidivism. Research is showing that juvenile crime is becoming more of a problem and that there is something that should be done about it (Evans, 2016)2.

I decided to look into this topic for various reasons. First of all, I have had family members involved in the criminal justice system and this has always been something that intrigues my interest. Secondly, I grew up in a town where a lot of our youth would get into trouble with the law which included jail time in some cases. Watching these youth go through this process but not seem to get any better or exhibit improved behavior sparked a curiosity in me. Caroline Evans (2016) talks about how youth’s involvement in the court system comes with many negative effects and because of these consequences, adolescents begin to obtain a weaker relationship within their society leading to other problems. I began asking myself the question “is there something else we could be doing for them?” which is why I have decided to look into this topic.

This literature review paper seeks to answer the question of what impact alternative intervention programs have on improving behavior in delinquent adolescents. For this study, I

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have been researching adolescents ranging from ages 10 to 21 of all races and genders. I believe that this is important to us as social workers to better understand how we can further assist our developing youth in our communities. The question is raised that if we can improve delinquent behavior early on, will that have a greater effect on adult-life behavior as well? I believe that by improving delinquent adolescent's support systems, that this will help improve behavior overall and give these youth another chance.

Problem Exploration

There are many different programs that have been developed for adolescence. In this section of this paper, I will be sharing my findings on the specific programs that I have looked into and what I have discovered about them and how they relate to improving delinquent adolescent behavior.

The first program that was researched were restorative justice (RJ) programs. Restorative justice programs were found to be very common in the United States. RJ programs seek to “create nonadversarial dialogue among victims, offenders, and other affected individuals to address the harms caused by crime and promote offender accountability” (Bergseth, 2013). In a nutshell, these programs strive to have the adolescent offender take responsibility for their actions and work to improve relationships not only between the offenders and the victims, but within the community as a whole. RJ programs include a variety of services including family group conferencing, victim-offender mediation, circle sentencing, and community reparative boards (Bergseth, 2013). Results from Bergseth's (2013) study showed that adolescents who were involved and participated in this programs remained offense-free longer than adolescents who went through the traditional juvenile court system. This study portrayed that restorative programs did help in reducing recidivism rates among delinquent adolescents, but the study also

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recognized that these types of programs may not be effective for all adolescents (Bergseth, 2013). This is important to understand because adolescents are all different, and some may fair better in certain programs than others. Overall, it has been shown that restorative programs do have an effect on improving delinquent adolescent behavior.

The next program that was researched is known as “Teen Court”. This is another alternative program to the traditional juvenile court system. Evans (2016) states that “Teen Court is an alternative to the juvenile justice system that seeks to reintegrate first-time, adolescent offenders into society through sanctions administered by a peer jury.” Caroline Evans (2016) speaks about how once an adolescent has a criminal record they face many consequences such as limited employment and educational opportunities, deportation, suspension of their driver’s license, eviction from public housing, and not being able to serve in our military. Teen court seeks to be an alternative so that adolescents who do commit a crime are given a second chance and do not have a permanent record following them for the rest of their life.

Teen court also seeks to reduce recidivism rates among adolescents as well. Evans (2016) states that “56% of juveniles who have been referred to juvenile court reoffend and return to court prior to turning 18.” Over half of juveniles in the criminal system end up back in the system which is a discouraging fact. Results from this studied varied when it came to different aspects. “6.4% of Teen Court participants reoffended sometime during the 6 months pre- and posttest” (Evans, 2016) discovered in relationship to recidivism. Evans (2016) did discover that the participants who went through the teen court system reported decreases in peer pressure and even in the delinquent friends that they had. Results also showed improvement in psychological functioning among participants in regards to aggression and violent behavior (Evans, 2016). The

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findings from this study seemed to show that teen court did have an effect on recidivism rates as well as displaying a positive outcome on other delinquent behavior in all.

“In 2013, over 30 million youth in the United States were under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system” reports McCarter (2016). The next study looked at suggests that certain mental health and school factors may contribute to delinquent adolescent behavior by being either a protective factor or a risk factor (McCarter, 2016). Problems in school can lead to serious consequences which can affect the development of that child. “As an early childhood risk, school truancy is identified as part of a developmental pathway to more serious, later criminal career” (Kim, 2013). Truancy can be associated with kids dropping-out, developmental issues, and rises in delinquent behavior. Youth who exhibit delinquent behavior have been shown to have higher mental health needs than other youth their age. “Mood disorders are estimated to occur in 10-25% of youthful offenders” (McCarter, 2016). Because of these statistics, wraparound forensic social work services were created to see if helping youth before they were placed into the court system would help on improving their behavior.

In this study, the researchers used two groups of adolescents. The first group received these wraparound services while the second group only received legal services. Results from this group showed that these services did not yield that wide of an effect on the group that had received them (McCarter, 2016). However, when looking at youth functioning in the group that received the services, the youths functioning “improved significantly on scales measuring withdrawal/depression, somatic complaints, thought problems, attention problems, rule-breaking behaviors, and aggressive behaviors” (McCarter, 2016). This study had the right idea of trying to attend to the underlying issues of mental health, substance abuse, and school problems, and is something that many researchers believe should be looked into further.

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Youth who are raised in poorer and more disconnected communities are often exposed to more violence earlier in life. This increases their chances at becoming involved in illegal activities and risky behavior. These youth often commit various crimes and have a higher rate of recidivism. This next study, Parental Monitoring, seeks to monitor youths' exposure to community violence in attempt to alter youth's future behaviors. "Promising research documents that programs incorporating youths' wider social contexts, such as their family, are more effective in reducing juvenile recidivism rates and other problem behaviors" (Voisin, 2012) is what parental monitoring is all about. This program predicts that parental involvement in the youth's life will help in reducing adolescent behavior. Parental monitoring is the "knowledge about youths' activities, whereabouts, and peer associations" (Voisin, 2012). Voisin (2012) also points out that bonds that are established between a parent and their child may be a reason for the type of behavior that child exhibits.

An interesting finding of this study states that "in the face of environments fraught with violence, parents can play an important role in reducing risk behaviors by restricting their youths' behaviors through increased monitoring or by modeling positive behaviors for their youth" (Voisin, 2012). Findings from this study point out that there is a positive relationship between parental monitoring and a decrease in risky behavior such as risky sex, drug use, and recidivism. Voisin (2012) state that their "results support contentions that parental monitoring is also a significant protective factor in the lives of youth." Incorporating a youth's family seems to have a positive effect on improving delinquent behavior among adolescents.

Another alternative to juvenile incarceration is the integration of family and group therapy known as "Parenting with Love and Limits" (PLL). "The PLL model targets juvenile offenders ... who have serious emotional and behavioral problems including issues with

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aggression, drug or alcohol abuse, sexual offending, severe disrespect, conduct disorders, running away, and/or chronic truancy” (Karam, 2017). PLL seeks to integrate families in the process of improving delinquent adolescent behavior. PLL is a strength-based program that focuses on improving the parent-child relationship and communication. Like parental monitoring, PLL includes monitoring the adolescent, limit setting, and continued discipline (Ryon, 2017). This is yet another study that speaks to the importance of family/parental involvement in delinquent adolescent lives.

Findings from these PLL studies made a note that there was a 72% completion rate (Karam, 2017). Police contact rates also decreased for youth who participated in PLL. “Recidivism rates were also lower for PLL youth than for the matched comparison group” (Karam, 2017) is another positive finding. Ryon (2017) also discovered that felony conviction rates decreased by 11% in youth who had completed PLL. “The results suggest that PFF may be a more appropriate intervention than low, moderate, or high-risk residential commitment both in terms of outcomes and cost” states Ryon (2017).

The next program researched was “Mode Deactivation Therapy” (MDT). MDT is a treatment for adolescents with behavioral problems such as anger, defiance, sexual aggression, and physical aggression (Apsche, 2012). Mode deactivation therapy focused more on male adolescents rather than both male and female. A finding of this study is that “Mode Deactivation therapy as a superior form of cognitive behavioral therapy addresses not just the acting out behavior, but internal states as well” (Apsche, 2012). This study yielded results in different areas such as physical aggression and verbal expressions of anger. MDT had a positive effect in both of these areas. This study mentions the importance of supportive families for delinquent

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adolescence, and the need to educate families on how to better communicate with each other (Apsche, 2012).

Juvenile delinquency is an important societal problem, with negative emotional, physical, and economic consequences for individual victims, local communities, and society as a whole” (Vries, 2015). This study looked into what makes a good and effective program for delinquent adolescents as well as studied and examined alternative prevention programs. Vries (2015) states “we found that these programs in general are effective in preventing persistent juvenile criminal behavior.” With these programs, the rate of reoffending could even be reduced by about 13%. Another finding of this study is that “prevention programs are equally effective for boys and girls, younger and older juveniles, and juveniles from different cultural backgrounds” (Vries, 2015). Another study suggests that adapting adult programs and forming them to the needs of juveniles will also help improve delinquent behavior (Starnes, 2013). Overall, alternative programs seem to be taking the justice system and turning it around in order to have an effect on modifying and improving behavior.

Limitations and Gaps in Literature

There are definitely limitations to almost anything in the world today, especially when it comes to research. A limitation that surfaced throughout this research was that since these studies are done on adolescents, permission must be granted. This could become a barrier in this type of research if parents or guardians do not allow their child to participate in such programs. Without families who are willing to participate and have their results shared, studies like these could not be completed.

One gap in literature that would be interesting to look into and explore further is to look into youth who do not have a strong support system or family. These studies mainly focused on

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research where the adolescents had their parents, families, or other support system to fall back on and support them. Without these support systems, it would be interesting to see how an adolescent fared in these programs. Another gap that was discovered was how long the length of these studies should be. If someone is studying recidivism and wants to see when and if these adolescents reoffend, does that mean these studies are done over the span of a lifetime? Another question was raised of how terrible does a committed crime have to be to not get into one of these programs? Can only adolescents with minor offenses be in these programs? Does this mean that adolescents who have committed larger crimes would not benefit from these same programs? These were the questions that were raised when thinking about limitations and gaps in this literature.

Theoretical Perspectives

There are multiple theories that help us understand why humans do what they do. In relation to adolescents, the theory of differential association helps us understand why adolescents display delinquent behavior. The theory of differential association states “that criminal behavior is the result of a learning process that stems primarily from small, intimate groups – family, neighborhood peer groups, and friends” (Zastrow, 2016). This theory talks about how adolescents are influenced from the culture and behaviors that are around them. As adolescents develop, they are prone to exhibit the same behavior that they grew up seeing. “When the environment includes frequent contact with criminal elements and infrequent contact with noncriminal elements, a person is apt to engage in delinquent or criminal activity” (Zastrow, 2016).

For example, according to the theory of differential association, if a child grows up in a household where the father is a drug dealer and the mother is a prostitute, the child is more likely

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to engage in delinquent behavior as well. Now let us say that this family lives in a neighborhood with high crime rates, this child has even more of a chance to partake in risky behavior because they are even more absorbed in this environment. Social workers can use this theory in practice when working with adolescents and their families. By building stronger, healthier families and communities, crime rates may decrease according to this theory.

Conclusion and Position

This literature review paper sought to answer the question of what impact alternate intervention programs have on improving delinquent adolescent behavior. Throughout this paper various programs have been analyzed, including Restorative Justice Programs, Teen Court, Parenting with Love and Limits, Parental Monitoring, Wraparound Services, as well as some others. Most of these studies have shown that “bonds parents establish with their child serve to be social control against deviant behaviors” (Voisin, 2012).

I agree with the findings from this study. From personal experiences, I have seen how big of a problem crime is becoming among adolescents. I especially agree with the studies that have stated that families and good support systems have a big impact on adolescent behavior. My position on this matter is that I do agree that some alternative intervention programs can and do improve delinquent behavior in adolescents. I also have noticed that there is still a lot that can be done for this population and that not one program is going to work for every case. Continuing to do research and develop alternate programs is critical as well as continuing our education and awareness of this problem.

Recommendations that I have for the church and fellow social workers would be to become aware of this issue. I believe that our church could step up and help in developing stronger, healthier families. By doing this, the environment in which our adolescents are growing

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up in can improve which may lead to positive behavior. I also believe that this is important for social workers to realize as well. If we can identify what is keeping a family from functioning at full capacity, then we can strive to help that family in any way that we can.

In the micro approach, social workers should be aware of the consequences that adolescents face when put through the traditional court system. All these consequences, such as a criminal record, will follow this adolescent around for the rest of their life. This can inhibit the functioning of this adolescent and cause more delinquent behavior in the future. As social workers we should become educated on how to best help youth in these situations so that they can have an improved and bright future.

When coming from a mezzo perspective, social workers should analyze programs and agencies that strive to help adolescents in these positions. Connecting adolescents and their families to resources in the community such as family therapy, group therapy, and other resources may help in improving overall family functioning which can lead to improved behavior and stronger families.

In the macro approach, developing programs such as the ones researched in this literature review is one way to go. Studying and analyzing studies like these and forming better programs to help delinquent adolescents is something that could be of use. Also, figuring out what other factors play into the development of an adolescent and how to improve that. Developing community programs and projects to improve community health and build strong communities is another route to take.

Overall, it seems that alternate intervention programs do help improve different aspect of delinquent adolescent behavior. This is becoming a larger problem here in the United States, and it is important to recognize that and to start doing something to improve it.

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