

YOUTH CRIME SUPPRESSION PROGRAMS

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Youth crime, especially involving violence, has become a major problem for American society. As with most problems involving anti-social behavior, youth violence has become a police problem.

The absence of a coherent government policy to deal with youth violence mixes with the prevalence of firearms to produce a potentially lethal neighborhood and school environment. Caught between perceptions of increasing levels of youth violence and inconsistent social and legal response to juvenile crime, the police are often frustrated when operating in the legal maze known as the juvenile justice system. Complicating the problem is the large amount of misinformation permeating society about youth violence. In truth, juvenile homicide is not widespread. "In 1994 four cities—Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Detroit—accounted for one-third of all homicide arrests and most (92%) counties had one or fewer juvenile homicide offenders (Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996).

The public perception of youth violence, therefore, is often the driving force behind the creation of youth-focused programs. Unfortunately, for police administrators, there is little difference whether increases in youth violence are actual or merely perceived. The public expects the police to act on either.

This paper will address a variety of programs and strategies that police departments have used to combat or prevent youth crime. Some of these programs appear to have achieved some success, while others are primarily public relations initiatives.

The focus of this paper will be on what the police can do about youth crime. While there are undoubtedly a variety of options available to other social service groups, decisions to implement these programs are outside the decision making realm of the police and, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Before identifying crime reduction actions and programs open to police agencies, we must first identify those factors that will thwart effective police action. When attempting to determine what the police can do, we must also identify those factors beyond police control.

Crime Data. Official arrest data consistently underestimates the amount of juvenile crime. This is because so many juvenile criminal events are undetected and, therefore, do not result in arrest (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Still, arrests of juveniles for violent crimes increased more than 70% between 1988 and 1995. This trend reversed in 1995, however, as juvenile arrests for violent crimes decreased by 4% (Jensen & Howard, 1998).

Before getting too caught up in these statistics, we must exercise caution. Arrest rates fluctuated between 1988 and 1995. This may be more reflective of changing policy than of changes in the level of criminal activity. Self report studies of high school seniors between 1983 and 1995 indicated very little change in criminal activities. The most remarkable aspect of these studies is the stability of juvenile crime levels. This suggests that youth crime is relatively unaffected by changes in society's approach to reducing juvenile crime (Jensen & Howard, 1998).

Controlling Youth Crime: Policy Issues. Over the past twenty years the attitude toward children and youth has changed dramatically. Despite the relative stability of actual levels of youth crime, a few high profile cases involving youth violence have propelled the education and justice systems into a deep suspicion of children. To be young is to be suspect. To be young and black or Hispanic is to suffer from a greatly increased suspicion (Fuentes, 1998).

In fact, crime data shows that today's violent youth commits the same number of violent acts as their predecessors of fifteen years ago. Moreover, today's violent offenders are not significantly younger than those of ten to fifteen years ago (Fuentes, 1998).

Despite these facts, the generation gap—present in all societies and through all eras—has taken on a sinister appearance. Adults are not merely puzzled by today's youth, they are terrified by them (Fuentes, 1998).

This general nervousness about the nation's youth has produced a "get tough" approach to crime control. Unfortunately, as the justice system gets tougher on young criminals, it actually generates more arrests and higher crime rates thus increasing the public's perception that the nation's youth are increasingly dangerous. The police, if not very careful, can contribute to the fear by overly aggressive law enforcement directed against juveniles.

Limitations. Police agencies are severely limited in their ability to influence behavior. They are designed as reactive forces; enforcing the law after a violation has occurred. Their powers of deterrence are often constrained by their perceived effectiveness in the investigative function. Only through demonstrating that criminals are frequently caught and punished, can the police convince others that breaking the law is a bad idea.

The concept of crime prevention, while a recognized goal of law enforcement, is alien in application to the nature and function of policing. The harsh reality is that police operations have only a limited influence on criminal behavior.

The demographic factor most closely associated with the level of crime in a community is the number of young people between 14 and 25 years of age. As the number of people within this age range rise and fall, criminal activity within the community rises and falls in proportion.

The importance of this fact cannot be overstressed. Increasing and declining crime rates are often nothing more than a statistical artifact of demographic trends. Linking the success or failure of a crime suppression project to juvenile crime rates without analyzing the prevalence of the 14-25 year old age group in the community is an error of major proportions.

Moreover, police agencies, like other organizations, are often vulnerable to fads. Prior to adopting any program, the department should carefully review its goals and measure those goals against its outcomes. Such review should strongly critique the program's assessment process. Many programs lack a valid assessment mechanism and, therefore, are not subject to accurate evaluation. Any program that cannot be accurately evaluated should, for the time being, be viewed as nothing more than a public relations gimmick or fad.

Finally, we must once more emphasize that the police will have only a limited impact on youth crime. The issue confronting a police agency must be one of resources versus outcomes.

Understanding that the change in youth crime will more than likely be small, what resources should be expended for any given crime suppression program?

Strategies. There are a vast array of programs and strategies created to solve the problems posed by youth crime. Unfortunately, there is precious little data upon which to evaluate success or failure. Too often programs are created through simplistic notions that fail to recognize the complexity of the social and economic environments. Others programs are created through desperation to do something even if it's wrong. Still other programs are carefully constructed, using sound theoretical foundations, but lack an evaluation mechanism sufficient to measure the program's effectiveness.

In this report we will look at a variety of strategies and the information available on potential effectiveness. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess each and every program designed to minimize youth crime. Instead, we will look at a broad range of program areas and attempt to evaluate some possibilities for success.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS

There is a growing belief that the most popular approaches for dealing with juvenile violence have not worked. This includes attempts to deinstitutionalize children, curfews, boot camps, organized sports, and gang prevention programs (Chaiken, 1998).

Designing a program to prevent youth crime must take several factors into account (Chaiken, 1998:xiii):

1. Age – The most dramatic increase in violence occurs in early adolescence.
2. Gender – Boys and girls are at equal risk until early adolescence after which boys are in greater danger of homicide while girls are in greater danger of sexual assault.
3. Families – Youth growing up in violent homes are more likely to become delinquent than other youth. This is also true of youth neglected and lacking supervision.
4. School - A child's attachment to school is a strong predictor of whether or not they will be seriously delinquent. Even good students, however, spend most of their time outside school.
5. Neighborhoods – Children and adolescents who live in high-crime neighborhoods where deadly weapons are common are at greater risk for violence and victimization.

Successful police activity in prevention is limited. There are some police strategies, however, that seem to offer the best chances for success. Realizing that police preventive programs work best when done in conjunction with other agencies, the best approach appears to be one of support rather than independent action.

There are a number of youth programs designed to help youths before they become delinquent. Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, 4-H programs, and Community Centers strive to provide facilities and programs useful in keeping youths occupied in positive activities. Police activities and programs aimed at supporting and strengthening these existing programs have demonstrated some potential for success (For a full discussion and description of these programs see Chaiken, 1998).

Curfews. Despite Chaiken's (1998) assessment that curfew laws have not worked, they are found in a large number of American cities. Implementing a curfew has been a local government reaction to perceived family and social breakdown in adult supervision. The theory behind curfew laws is that the late hours of the evening and early hours of the morning are when youths are most apt to engage in inappropriate behavior. Also it is believed that adolescents, left unsupervised during late night hours when businesses are closed, will sometimes—in their efforts at seeking entertainment—get into trouble.

Curfews attempt to do what parents will not or cannot do; provide limits on youth's freedom. Because these are laws that limit freedom, they have been subject to legal challenge. Well-crafted laws have, however, withstood court challenge, while loosely drafted ones have not (Bilchik, 1996).

To date, many major cities have curfew ordinances in effect. The initial research is sketchy. Curfew laws are controversial and there are public relations problems for the police in their efforts to enforce these laws. Cities that have comprehensive programs for their youth in conjunction with curfew laws, however, appear to offer the best prospect for success (Bilchik, 1996).

INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Intervention is based on the idea that violence does not occur instantly, but builds through a series of actions and counter actions. This sequence of events eventually leads to a violent confrontation (Lockwood, 1997).

Research conducted by Daniel Lockwood discovered that three fourths of the violent incidents reviewed, started either at school or at home. Most opening moves in the sequence included offensive touching; about 70% of those involved blamed the opening move on their antagonist. Interestingly, the duration of the sequence of events was, in most cases, short—not more than 15 minutes.

In these cases adults in charge of these youths were knowledgeable of only about half the incidents. Peers, on the other hand, were present in about 60% of the cases and their major role appears to have been to encourage violence or to join in to support one of the combatants.

In 40% of the cases studied, the stated goal of the violence was retribution. In 22%, the goal was attempting to enforce compliance—convincing an antagonist to desist from offensive actions. In 21% of the cases, self-defense was the stated goal. In 8% of the cases, saving face or promoting one's image was the goal.

There were a number of actions that an adult could take to intervene prior to an argument becoming violent. "Supervising adults—specifically teachers, mothers, and police officers—are prime candidates for training in conflict resolution, since the study revealed that at some point they may be called in to manage the confrontation (Lockwood, 1997:6)." Practically speaking, the earlier in the sequence that intervention occurs, the greater the likelihood of successfully preventing a violent confrontation.

ANTI-GANG PROGRAMS

Gang violence did not change significantly between 1950 and 1970. As the decade of the 70's progressed, however, gang activities became increasingly violent (Miller, 1992).

Complicating the study of gangs is the fact that levels of gang violence vary among gangs, cities, communities, and even within internal cliques (Miller, 1974; Block and Block, 1993; Fagan, 1989). "Violence is a variable. Violence is not something inevitable and fixed with gangs (Moore, 1988:225)." There is a seven step process that accounts for the highs and lows of gang violence (Decker, 1996):

1. Gang members feel loose bonds to the gang.
2. Gang members collectively perceive a threat from a rival gang (which increases gang cohesion).
3. A mobilizing event occurs—possibly, but not necessarily, violent.
4. There is an escalation of activity.
5. One of the gangs lashes out in violence.
6. Violence and activity rapidly deescalate.
7. The other gang retaliates.

A further complication occurs because of a general lack of understanding of gang structure. Most assume street gangs are also drug gangs. In fact, there are numerous differences between street gangs and drug gangs (Klein, 1995:132):

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF GANG TYPES

STREET GANGS	DRUG GANGS
Versatile ("cafeteria-style") crime	Crime focused on drug business
Larger structures	Smaller structures
Less cohesive	More cohesive
Looser leadership	More centralized leadership
Ill-defined roles	Market-defined roles
Code of loyalty	Requirements of loyalty
Residential territories	Sales market territories
Members may sell drugs	Members do sell drugs
Inter-gang rivalries	Competition controlled
Younger on average, but wider age range	Older on average, but narrower age range.

While a variety of programs have been implemented to solve the gang problem, there is little, if any, research that suggests much success. Of these programs, a few have shown some positive preliminary results. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm's school-based gang prevention curriculum, Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.), is such a program (Howell, 1998). Another is the Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach to Gang prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Program (Spergel, ET al, 1994).

For more information on these programs, contact the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the OJJDP report by Spergel. Both programs have long term objectives, rather than offer quick fixes. That is partly why evaluation indicates the possibility for success, instead of guarantees. For departments facing a growing gang problem, these are two programs worth at least investigating.

YOUTH GUN VIOLENCE REDUCTION

There is also a strong connection between the availability of guns and juvenile violence. Boys and adolescent males owning guns for protection, rather than sport, are six times more likely to carry guns. These same youths are eight times more likely to commit a crime with a gun, four times more likely to sell drugs, almost five times more likely to be in a gang. Moreover, they are three times more likely to commit serious and violent crimes than youth who do not own guns for protection (Lizotte et al, 1994).

As guns have become more available, youth violence has also become more lethal (Bilchik, 1996; American Psychological Association, 1993; Elliott, 1994; Jones and Krisberg, 1994; McDowell, 1991). The number of juveniles committing homicides without firearms has remained constant since the 1970's. During the same time, however, homicides by juveniles with firearms have increased by a factor of three. Moreover, juvenile arrests for weapons violations increased 117% during the same time (Bilchik, 1996).

There are a variety of programs designed to reduce gun violence among youth. These programs range from counseling teams placed in areas with a large number of at-risk teens to weapon removal programs. For a complete listing of these programs see reducing *Youth Gun Violence* by OJJDP.

Thus far all of these programs are experimental. To date there is no credible evaluation of any of these programs; therefore, there is no way of determining their effectiveness.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

Tension between public schools and justice agencies is a continuous problem that must never be overlooked. The roots of the conflict are found in the competing philosophies of the contending institutions. One of the primary intervention techniques employed by juvenile justice professionals is to get troubled youths back into school. This strategy is in direct contradiction to school administrative philosophy, which is to remove problem students from the classroom.

It is easy to see the source of the problem. Justice officials are dealing with a single youth; they see inclusion with other, more stable youths, as offering the best hope to solve the problems of this one young person. Schools attempt to do what is best for a large number of youths. To the school administrator and teacher, inclusion introduces a disruptive influence to the classroom. They see this strategy as sacrificing the interests of a group of good students for one student who has already demonstrated an unwillingness or inability to function effectively in the school environment.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma. Prior to initiating a school-based crime suppression program, however, the police must be aware of several limitations:

1. Schools are not designed, organized, or staffed as correctional facilities.
2. School administrators and teachers are not trained to confront, restrain, or counsel disruptive and sometimes violent people.
3. Schools have a relatively small number of adults available to supervise a large number of students. The large number of fights, incidences of vandalism and

- petty thefts that have historically been part of the education experience, stand as testimony to the difficulty inherent in supervising large student populations.
4. School administrators and teachers are overwhelmed with a wide variety of government reporting requirements, curriculum issues, classroom management problems, and extracurricular sponsorship or supervision. They have severe time limitations regarding availability for additional duties or activities.
 5. School personnel require as much protection from assault, theft, and vandalism as the students.
 6. The natural reaction of school personnel responding to a violent or disruptive student is expulsion. Programs returning violent or disruptive students to the classroom will be resented by school personnel, especially the classroom teacher involved.

With these limitations in mind, police agencies must carefully consider the viability of school-based programs prior to their implementation.

Despite these limitations, schools provide the only place where young people gather in large numbers under adult supervision. Moreover, schools are increasingly the site of youth violence. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 1996-97, 10% of US public schools experienced at least one serious violent crime. There were nearly 190,000 physical attacks or fights without weapons, as well as a high number of thefts and vandalism (Violence and Discipline Problems in US Public Schools, 1996-97).

These statistics do not reflect the large amount of harassment, including sexual harassment that regularly occurs in public schools. Such incidents create a hostile environment in which students may feel the need to arm themselves for protection (Lamberg, 1998).

Experts have known for some time what needs to be done to minimize violence in schools. Primarily, children need to feel safe at school. They need a strong adult protective shield. That means the school must be very clear about security (Lamberg, 1998).

Much of what schools need are beyond the scope of programs that might be provided by the local police department. Security programs, however, that support the schools' efforts at maintaining a safe environment offer the greatest potential for success.

"Feel Good" police school programs, such as DARE, provide good public relations for the police and create a reason for having police officers on campus, but have not demonstrated effectiveness at reducing illicit drug use or youth violence.

There is sometimes a need for a public relations type program. When students and their parents feel nervous about drug use and violent behavior in the schools, the police sometimes need to do something positive, even if what they do is ineffective. Public relations is not just about politics, it is also about demonstrating that the police care about what is happening in the schools. If all the police can do is to institute a DARE program or police athletic league, or some other program that puts police officers in contact with students in a positive atmosphere, then that is what should be done. Reducing tension and community fear is also a part of the police mission.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The number and types of programs designed to combat youth crime are virtually limitless. Thorough and accurate assessment of these programs is almost non-existent. Police departments, therefore, can select any program they want and proceed with implementation. They may never know, however, to what extent the selected program is successful.

Part of the problem is also part of the solution. In the effort to help police agencies address youth violence, federal and state governments have provided resources for implementing programs. Money can be addictive. Departments create poorly devised schemes to get the resources and either provide no evaluation of the program or design a weak evaluation to support the program so that funding will continue. It is an old game, one that generates numerous programs, most of which have little if any value. Still, without these resources, departments would be hard pressed to attempt anything new. We all hope that somewhere in the myriad of ineffective programs are one or two that will work. If that is the case, the expenditures might be justified.

Prior to implementing any crime reduction program for youth, the chief administrator should address several questions:

1. What is the precise nature of the problem?
2. What are the options available to attack the problem?
3. Of these options, which are viable for this particular agency (sufficient resources, public support, internal support, public support, etc.).
4. Of the viable options, which program offers the greatest prospect for success?
5. What are the difficulties in implementing the selected program?
6. What is the time frame for implementation and completion (how long will it take to initiate the program and how long before change becomes detectable)?
7. How will we know if the program worked?

One of the primary dangers with any police-oriented program is setting expectations too high. It is very likely that the failure of many programs to demonstrate success is due to an expectation that such programs will produce major changes. In reality, a successful program may be one that achieves small successes, some of which may be barely noticeable. That is why it is important for the agency initiating a program to be realistic in its expectations. The police agency must, in its determination of success or failure, answer the following question:

For this program to be successful how much behavior change is enough?

1. How many youths must be diverted from anti-social behavior?
2. How many violent confrontations must be averted?
3. What is the expected minimum drop in the number of crimes committed by youth?
4. How large a drop in illicit drug use is enough?
5. How much improvement is needed in the perception of safety among youth?
6. How much improvement is needed in the public's perception of the police agency or the program?
7. If there is no positive change in any of the above measurements, is there a difficult to measure benefit of this program and if so, is it worth the expenditure of department resources?

Minimal change in any of these areas may be sufficient to justify the program. Expecting major changes in any of these areas, especially in a short time period, is unrealistic. When drastic change in juvenile crime does occur, it is usually the result of changing demographics or economic conditions rather than the by-product of a single program. Moreover, intervention and prevention programs target youth that may not yet be involved in illegal activity. It could take years before the results of the program are measurable. Many departments make the mistake of killing a program because it either did not work miracles or did not result in rapid change.

In summary, when deciding on a program, the police agency should carefully identify the goals of the program, select the program that most addresses those goals, closely track the progress of the program, and be patient; it will take a while before the actual results are known.

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