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Juvenile justice systems: A need for improved research and treatment

Tenethrea Thompson^{*} and *M. Jean Turner*[§]

ABSTRACT

The characteristics of juveniles who commit crimes and a variety of treatment philosophies for juvenile offenders were examined through literature and individual case studies. The literature review and three case studies provided insight into the difficult challenge of providing effective treatment programs for juvenile offenders.

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MEET THE STUDENT-AUTHOR



Tenethrea Thompson

I am a 1998 graduate from Bearden High School. I graduated magna cum lauda from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville with a bachelor of science degree in human environmental sciences. I was involved in many campus organizations. I was president of the U of A inspirational singers, a member of Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society, Golden Key Honor Society, student ambassadors, student health advisory council, and Black Students Association. I was also a volunteer for Make a Difference Day, Habitat for Humanity, and Alternative Spring Break.

I decided to do this project for several different reasons: I wanted to challenge myself, learn more about the juvenile justice system and how it could be improved, and I wanted research experience. While working on this project I learned that social science research can be very difficult, but rewarding. I became interested in juvenile justice because I saw young people in my community getting involved in delinquent behaviors, and I wanted to make a difference.

I will begin working on my master's degree in counseling in the fall. I would like to be a counselor for juvenile delinquents and their families. I would like to eventually open a community center in a low income neighborhood.

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Jean Turner for being patient and encouraging me.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile crime and the treatment of juveniles in the criminal justice system are an increasingly important concern in the United States. According to a 1999 national report, one in every five arrests made by law enforcement agencies involved a juvenile (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). Juvenile delinquency is a financial and emotional drain on families and on society as a whole. It costs about \$103 per day to house juvenile delinquents in detention centers in Benton County (Personal Communication, Randell Everett, Director, Benton County Juvenile Detention Center, March 15, 2002). Juvenile crime is an emotional drain because adolescents are dying, going to prison, and causing grief and suffering to families on a daily basis. Juveniles accounted for 37% of all burglary arrests in 1997, 30% of all robbery arrests, 24% of weapons arrests, 14% of murder arrests, and 14% of drug arrests. In 1997, juvenile homicides were the lowest in the decade, but still 21% above the average of adolescent homicides in the 1980's (U.S.

Department. of Justice, 1999). Although progress has been made in the area of juvenile crime and treatment, there is still a great deal of work to be done. In order to understand how to approach this issue, one must examine the characteristics of juveniles who become delinquents and the differing treatment philosophies related to adolescent rehabilitation.

What factors determine who will become a juvenile delinquent? This research project examines the characteristics of juveniles who commit crimes and a variety of treatment philosophies for juvenile offenders. It describes a local juvenile treatment facility and explores personal characteristics of a few of the adolescents sentenced to the facility. Examining these issues provides a significant challenge to social science researchers, but such research is critical if we are to change the juvenile crime statistics.

Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders

There are many people who grow up under similar circumstances but some choose delinquency and others do not. Professionals and parents would like to know

what makes the difference for these two types of individuals. Factors that contribute to delinquency include failure of adolescents to develop compassionate and empathetic feelings for others and difficulty meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. Adolescents may turn to delinquent behaviors as they struggle to meet their emotional and physical needs (Jenkins et al., 1985).

The home life of adolescents has an influence on their involvement with delinquency. In a study to examine the influence of the family, it was found that parents of delinquents were more likely to use physical punishment than parents of non-delinquents (Conger and Miller, 1966). These researchers also found that parents of delinquents tended to express less affection, more indifference and hostility, and less warmth and sympathy toward their children. Also, compared to the control group, only a few of the juvenile offenders had close ties to their fathers. Another aspect of home life is the household structure. It was believed that a large family size increased the likelihood of becoming a delinquent because parents could not provide the proper supervision for a large number of children. Research indicates that family size alone is not a risk factor, but rather the dynamics of the family itself creates the risk. For example, if the parents or siblings are involved in criminal behavior then the likelihood increases that the juvenile will get involved with crime (Rutter et al., 1998). According to Rosenberg (1965), family structure has a major effect on adolescents. For example, research shows that, in general, children with no siblings have higher self-esteem than children with siblings. Young boys with older brothers have lower self-esteem than young boys with older sisters (Rosenberg, 1965). These findings show that family make-up has a profound impact on how people view themselves.

Another risk factor for delinquency is being from a "broken home." Research shows that delinquency is lower among adolescents who live with both biological parents than among children born out of wedlock or children from single-parent homes (Rutter et al., 1998).

According to the report by the Office of Juvenile Justice (1999), other factors that contribute to delinquency include family and individual characteristics, neighborhood environment, and daily activities. Strong demographic predictors include gender and age. Boys are much more likely than girls to become serious high rate offenders. In 2001, Benton County reported 462 intakes of males and only 93 intakes of females, and Washington County reported 478 males and only 175 females charged with criminal offenses.

Race is also a factor in juvenile delinquency. In studies of the District of Columbia and of South Carolina, it

was found that African Americans were disproportionately arrested for violent crimes (Office of Juvenile Justice, 2002). The population of African Americans in South Carolina is about 30% of the total population. The study revealed that 82% of the juvenile homicide offenders referred to the solicitor were African-American.

All of the factors found to be related to delinquent behavior affect how individuals view themselves. These factors are all significant contributors to an adolescent's self-esteem, the lack of which has also been tied to delinquent behaviors.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the degree of self-respect a person feels about him or herself. Self-esteem is only part of self-concept. Self-concept is how a person describes and characterizes himself or herself (Steinberg, 1996). There are many factors that contribute to a person's self-concept such as family relationships, friends, academic success, and past experiences. A person usually behaves in the manner that he or she feels represents who he or she is. This fact illustrates why it is so important to work with adolescents who are involved in the juvenile justice system to help them see themselves in a more positive light. Often juveniles in the juvenile detention center (JDC) system are referred to by labels that they then internalize. Once a juvenile is labeled delinquent, he or she often shapes his or her behavior to fit the label (Shoemaker, 1984). The juvenile then begins to experience a self-fulfilling prophecy. Often juveniles' behaviors are directly related to what they perceive others think of them or how they think of themselves (Steinberg, 1996). According to Branden (1979), people are born with the need for self-esteem but they are not born with the skills or knowledge of how to achieve self-esteem.

Research reveals that delinquents have lower self-esteem scores than adolescents who are not involved in delinquent behaviors. Ruchkins et al. (1999) tested the possible interrelationship between hopelessness, loneliness, self-esteem and personality in delinquent and non-delinquent adolescents, and found no significant difference between delinquents' levels of hopelessness or loneliness and the levels of the non-delinquent control group (Ruchkin, Eisemann, & Hagglof, 1999). However, there were significant differences in self-esteem.

Treatment Philosophies

Our society has tried many theoretical approaches to prevent juvenile delinquency but none offer a total answer. It is really going to take a wholistic approach to solve this difficult problem. One of the most common punishments for juveniles in the juvenile justice system is to be sentenced to juvenile detention, or kiddie jail.

The purpose of (JDC) is to provide a secure, safe, and caring environment for juveniles held under the authority of juvenile court (Personal Communication, Randell Everett, Director, Benton County Juvenile Detention Center, 2002). Juvenile detention centers have differing philosophies about how to fulfill this purpose.

Scared Straight. The scared straight program attempts to scare juveniles into staying out of prison. In this type of treatment, adolescents are taken on a tour of an adult prison. While there they attend an intensive confrontational session run by inmates serving long or lifetime sentences. During the session the negative aspects of prison are emphasized. The main way the inmate communicates with the juveniles is through screaming and yelling threats. Research results have shown that such programs are not effective. In fact, the approach often leads to an increase in delinquent behavior rather than a reduction (Lundman, 1984).

Incarceration. Another view of the use of the JDC is for deterrence. The supporters of this view believe that there should be more incarceration because it is a painful, appropriate consequence of a young person's involvement in delinquency. They also believe punishment of one individual will deter others from committing crimes (Lundman, 1984).

Deterrence. The deterrence philosophy has developed because research has shown that a small percentage of juvenile delinquents commit the majority of the juvenile crimes. This approach includes the concept that if repeat offenders are identified and locked up, juvenile crime rates will decrease (Lundman, 1984).

Supporters of deterrence theory view juvenile crime as an individual problem. In order to correct this problem, individuals must take responsibility for themselves. This philosophy believes that there are two steps to take in order to prevent juvenile delinquency. The first step is to identify juveniles headed for delinquency. Once the juvenile is identified, he or she is counseled by social workers, counselors, and other trained professionals to help prevent delinquent behaviors (Lundman, 1984). This philosophy sounds attractive in theory but the problem often lies in the fact that it is extremely difficult to identify juveniles headed toward delinquency. Unjustly labeling adolescents often leads to the disadvantages that come with labeling theory. However, this philosophy does influence diversion philosophy (Lundman, 1984).

Diversion. Diversion supporters believe that treating first-time offenders as if they are repeat offenders causes them to view themselves as criminals. Therefore, they express a self-fulfilling prophecy and become serious offenders (Lundman, 1984). Missouri, Tennessee,

Florida, and New York participated in a national evaluation of diversion projects. In the evaluation, juveniles were referred by police and prosecutors. These juveniles received individual and family counseling along with employment, educational, and recreational services. After examining all the research, it was concluded that diversion should be the first option for juveniles that commit status or minor offenses (Lundman, 1984). Status offenses are offenses that are only illegal because of the age of the offender, for example, truancy and under-age drinking (Steinberg, 1996).

A Case Study

Washington County Regional JDC provided an opportunity for a case study of a facility that believes in the integrated model of adolescent rehabilitation. Although the Washington County Regional JDC is officially just a "detention center," it has many characteristics of a diversion program. Washington County is experiencing a rapid and dramatic population growth. As the overall population grows, crime rates also tend to increase. Washington County Regional JDC has 36 beds, which are usually full. The primary reason juveniles are sentenced to the JDC is probation violations. Therefore, it is important to establish JDC programs that effectively reduce recidivism rates among juveniles.

The Washington County JDC implemented two new programs in 2002. The first program is a computer skills program called Tech Life, designed to teach adolescents skills that will help them when they are released. In addition, it is believed that becoming competent in computer skills will increase their overall sense of competency. The self-esteem element of the program is a by-product of developing that competency. As the computer skills help the youth get good jobs, their self-esteem increases because they see and experience more options for their life outside the criminal justice system.

The second program is entitled BARK. This program is designed to teach the adolescents to take responsibility for animals and realize their sense of self worth by doing so. In the program, dogs from the local animal shelter are brought to the JDC where the resident adolescents will the dogs to be helpers for families with disabled people. The youth also are involved in showing the family proper pet care so the resident adolescents must learn how to be responsible for another living creature. The staff at the JDC believes that taking responsibility for another creature and receiving the unconditional love animals often give helps individuals of all ages develop a stronger sense of competency and a higher level of self-esteem.

The center also has long-standing programs such as counseling and educational programs. These collabora-

tive programs are with Youth Bridge, Ozark Guidance Center, Fayetteville Public Schools and other family services providers.

The self-esteem scores for juvenile delinquents are on average lower than those of their non-delinquent peers. One of the goals of this study was to explore whether or not adolescents in the Washington County Regional JDC scored as high as non-delinquent youth in other research studies. However, because of the small sample size, that comparison was not possible. It proved to be more practical and beneficial to do individual case studies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of juvenile offenders sentenced to the Washington County Regional JDC. All necessary federal reviews for the protection of human subjects were completed. Signed consent forms were completed by both the adolescents and the parents. Only those adolescents who complete parental consent forms were allowed to be considered for participation in this research project. If a visiting parent signed the consent form, their adolescent was asked to participate and sign a consent form of his or her own. Questionnaires were then distributed to juveniles who signed the required form.

Measures

The participating juveniles completed Rosenberg's self-esteem survey. They also answered questions about their personal and family characteristics, family life, experiences at the JDC, and their interactions with the JDC staff.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is one of the most widely used self-esteem measures in social science research. There are 10 questions using a four-point scale. Responses vary from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Items numbered three, five, eight, nine, and ten are reverse-coded for analysis purposes. Previous research indicates that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has acceptable reliability for this type of study (DuBois, 1996).

Other Questionnaire Items

The questionnaire also included questions about demographic information, attitudes, and the JDC program. The complete questionnaire is attached as Table 1.

Results

Because of the variation in length of court sentencing and the transitory nature of being sentenced to the JDC, the population pool was very small. The size of the population was reduced because opportunity for parental

consent was limited to weekend visiting days. Also, many of the parents did not come to visit the adolescents on the visiting days. Once consent forms were gathered from both the parents and the juveniles, the actual number of respondents participating in the study was only three. Obviously, this number is too small to provide representative statistical analysis. However, the data from these individuals provides some information about a very select group of juvenile offenders sentenced to the JDC. The results reflect individual case studies. All identifying personal information has been omitted from this report.

The participants ranged in age from 15-17 years old. None of the participants came from a household with two biological parents. The structure was either a single parent household or a household including a step-parent. All of the participants had siblings. According to respondents none of these factors contributed to the participants becoming involved with delinquency. However, as other research suggests, these factors may have influenced the choices that they made. In the discussion of the results participants will be referred to as X, Y, and Z and male in gender.

According to the self-report responses, participant X felt that the JDC staff cared. Participants Y and Z felt that the staff was neutral in regard to caring for the participants. Participant X felt that the JDC had a negative effect on him. Participant Y did not feel that the JDC had a positive or negative influence. Participant Z felt that the JDC had a very positive influence. Participants X and Y were neutral in rating the staff interaction. Participant Z felt that there was a great deal of staff interaction. All of the participants felt they had good family lives. Each participant saw the importance of an education. Participant Y felt better about himself than when he entered the JDC. Participants X and Z did not feel better about themselves after being in the JDC. No participant felt worse about himself after being in the JDC. Each participant saw a need for change in his life. Participant X felt that his parents had a negative influence. Participant Y felt that his parents did not influence him negatively or positively. Participant Z felt that his parents influenced him positively. Participant X felt that he learned techniques that would keep him away from future criminal behavior. Participant Y felt he learned techniques that would keep him out of trouble. Participant Z felt that he learned techniques that would keep him out of trouble and keep him from returning to Washington County Regional JDC.

The self-esteem scores ranged from 21 to 35. The highest score possible was a 40. Individual scores were; X 21, Y 24, and Z 35.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With only three participants, the survey provided no useable data, but the attempted study provided an opportunity to get a closer look at the juvenile justice system and the juveniles it serves. Each question had an opposite item on the questionnaire. On several of the questions the participants answered with two different opinions. These seemingly conflicting responses could be explained by the fact that the participant could have been thinking about different staff members or experiences when answering each question. It is also very important to note that it is difficult for the JDC to substantially influence the participant, even though there are several different programs offered by the Center, because of the limited time adolescents spend in the Center.

When examining the results, it is interesting to note that the participant with the highest self-esteem score felt that the JDC had a positive influence. The participant who felt JDC had a negative effect on him had decided to give up the life of delinquency but was arrested just before this change of mind. This response implies that if a person is ready to give up crime, placing him in a facility that punishes of criminal behavior by lock-up with other offenders could actually reinforce negative influences.

The participant who scored very high on the self-esteem scale and felt like he had a good family life did not fit the typical characteristics of juvenile delinquents. This demonstrates the fact that there is likely no way to identify all adolescents headed for delinquency.

In order to make a difference in juvenile crime rates, society should begin to monitor juvenile offenders. Since offender records are limited, one cannot determine which programs are effective and which are ineffective for reducing juvenile crime. There are many different ways to approach preventing and treating juvenile delinquency. Until we examine the strengths of various approaches and create a treatment that encompasses the strengths of productive philosophies we will continue to hear about soaring juvenile crime rates.

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Table 1. Questionnaire

Please respond to the following questions to the best of your knowledge. Check the response that best fits.

Age ___ 10 ___ 11 ___ 12 ___ 13 ___ 14 ___ 15 ___ 16 ___ 17 ___ 18

Gender: ___ male ___ female

Grade level currently in ___

Parents' education level:

Mother: ___ middle school/ junior high, ___ some high school, ___ high school diploma/GED, ___ some college, ___ community college/technical school, ___ college degree or beyond, ___ don't know.

Father: ___ middle school/ junior high, ___ some high school, ___ high school diploma/GED, ___ some college, ___ community college/technical school, ___ college degree or beyond, ___ don't know.

Family household structure

- (1) One parent living in household ___
- (2) Both Parents living in household ___
- (3) One biological parent and one step parent in household ___
- (4) Live with other relatives ___
If yes, Who?
 - a. Brother or sister ___
 - b. Grandparent ___
 - c. Other relative ___
- (5) Live with friends ___

Number of Brothers ___ and/or ___ Sisters

List all the programs you have participated in at the JDC?
--Specific programs will be listed on the blackboard --

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Which program do you like the most?
Why?

Which do you like the least?
Why?

Is this your first offense? Y or N

What was the offense that led to your time in the JDC?

Table 1. Questionnaire, continued

Answer the following questions on a scale of 1 – 4 (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree)

I feel the staff here really care about me and my well being.	1	2	3	4
JDC has had a positive influence on me.	1	2	3	4
There is very little staff interaction here.	1	2	3	4
I feel like I had a bad family life.	1	2	3	4
I see no reason to be concerned about my education.	1	2	3	4
I feel better about myself now than when I first came.	1	2	3	4
I see no need for change in my life.	1	2	3	4
I feel worse about myself now than when I first came.	1	2	3	4
My parent(s) influence me positively.	1	2	3	4
JDC has had a negative impact on me.	1	2	3	4
I feel the staff really do not care about me or my well being.	1	2	3	4
I learned techniques that will help keep me out of trouble.	1	2	3	4
There is a great deal of staff interaction.	1	2	3	4
I now see the importance of my education.	1	2	3	4
My parent(s) influence me negatively.	1	2	3	4
I feel like I have a good family life.	1	2	3	4
I see a need for change in my life.	1	2	3	4
I learned techniques that will help keep me from unlawful behavior.	1	2	3	4

Please respond to each of the following statements with the response that best describes your feelings about yourself. Please place the number of the response that best describes you on the line to the left of the question.

Respond according to the following scale:

- (1) Strongly disagree
- (2) Disagree
- (3) Agree
- (4) Strongly agree

- _____ 1. I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
- _____ 2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- _____ 3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
- _____ 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
- _____ 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
- _____ 6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
- _____ 7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- _____ 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- _____ 9. I certainly feel useless at times.
- _____ 10. At times I think I am no good at all.

Is there anything else you would like to say?