

Prevention and Early Intervention

Youth Offender Demonstration Grant Project Tip Sheet

Tip Sheet 1 – May 27, 2003

WHAT IT IS: While many view the juvenile justice system as a formal network dispensing justice, treatment, services, and sanctions to offending young persons, the system also includes a number of programs and activities available to at-risk youth prior to formal involvement with the juvenile court. These services are usually designed to assist all at-risk youth who have already demonstrated certain behaviors that are generally recognized as precursors to delinquency, substance abuse, or dropping out of school.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT: In the field of juvenile justice today, researchers recognize that there are certain factors (e.g., abuse or neglect, substance abuse, gang membership) that may put adolescents at risk of entering into delinquency. These factors are not causal in nature but can increase the probability that a young person will commit illegal acts. Fortunately, there are also protective factors that can provide a buffer or mitigate against those risks. Examples of protective factors include supportive relationships with parents or other adults, commitment to school, positive social orientation, and friends who engage in conventional or less risky behavior.

The most successful efforts at prevention and early intervention recognize these factors in their design and operation. Fortunately, the young people targeted in the Youth Offender Demonstration Project can benefit from a range of best practices designed to prevent future delinquency, break the cycle of crime and delinquency, and continue with secondary education.

BEST PRACTICES. The latest research and evaluation of prevention and early intervention programs, many of which are briefly described in the publications listed below, indicate that the most successful efforts are those targeted to children demonstrating problem behaviors at the earliest grade school levels, and that the most successful substance abuse and gang prevention efforts are those targeted to children in middle schools.

COMMUNITY. From an individual perspective, one of the oldest and most recognized prevention and early intervention strategies has been *mentoring programs*. Research conducted in the 1990s demonstrated a reduction in delinquency and substance abuse and improvement in school attendance for at-risk youth involved in mentoring programs with Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Through a mentoring relationship, adult volunteers and participating youth make a significant commitment of time and energy for personal, academic, and career development. Programs can be based in schools, colleges, or communities, or in the faith community.

SCHOOLS. For adolescents aged 14 and above, youth offender projects and communities are encouraged to employ unique educational programs designed to keep them in school and develop positive attitudes toward the educational experience. Examples include *career academies*, which are schools within schools that link students with peers, teachers, and community partners in a disciplined environment. By drawing a relationship between school and work readiness, school-based programs are efforts designed to bring youth who have dropped out of school back to complete their education requirements or earn a GED. *Alternative schools* can provide youth unable to succeed in the mainstream school environment with a way of succeeding in other educational settings. *Truancy centers*, dedicated to truancy reduction, have been operating in some communities, and show promise in alleviating that particular problem. Two other highly respected programs include *Communities in Schools (CIS)* and the *Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP)*. CIS helps communities integrate youth and families into schools. QOP is an educational incentive and mentoring program specifically designed to keep economically disadvantaged youth in school. Youth offender projects should consider adopting

these designs or collaborating with existing programs.

YOUTH GANGS. According to experts in gang research, there is a specific research finding that gang members are usually involved in delinquent activity prior to gang membership. This fact leads to the recommendation of general prevention efforts in the entire adolescent population for reducing gang involvement. Certain risk factors associated with gang membership include high levels of interaction among antisocial peers, low levels of commitment to school, and higher levels of social isolation. One of the most aggressive efforts to reach youth at risk of gang involvement has been the work of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America's *Gang Prevention Through Targeted Outreach*, with structured recreational, educational, and life skills programs.

Dealing with the problems associated with crime and delinquency, substance abuse, and gangs by creating positive opportunities for youth is a worthy societal goal. One of the best means of meeting this goal is to employ proven and best practices.

WEB RESOURCES

The National Mentoring Partnership

www.mentoring.org

Communities in Schools

www.cisnet.org

National Youth Gang Center

www.iir.com/nygc

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice

www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

Quantum Opportunities Program

www.oicofamerica.org/programs.html

PUBLICATIONS

Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC, 1998.

Sherman, Lawrence, et al., *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising.* National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice: Washington, DC, 1997.

Some Things Do Make A Difference: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices. American Youth Policy Forum, Institute for Educational Leadership. Washington, DC: AYPF Printing, 1997.

Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Rockville, MD: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001.

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