Children, Youth & Family

background

Juvenile Crime
When Schools Take a Stand

Crime & Delinquency
Schools well suited to curb lingering problem

Children committing crime is always disturbing news and over the last several years stories of children as perpetrators of crime have been reported with alarming frequency.

High profile solutions tend to be tough, sometimes extreme measures, such as youth boot camps and trying children as adults.

Within schools, "get-tough" solutions such as expulsion and out-of-school suspension are overwhelmingly popular, despite little scientific evidence that such zero-tolerance measures are effective in reducing school violence or increasing school safety.

But several preventive measures addressing the factors that put children at risk of developing criminal behaviors have been shown, through rigorous study, to reduce aggression and violence in America's schools.

Recent national priorities set for children, such as those found in Healthy People 2000 and the National Education Goals, look to schools to play a strong role in preventing a range of social problems, including crime.

Why schools? First, they are well positioned to help. Schools provide regular access to children throughout their developmental years. Their job of educating is, in itself, an important crime prevention measure. Schools are staffed with professionals trained to help children develop as healthy, happy, productive citizens. And many of the factors that influence delinquent behavior are school-related.

Despite its potential, federal funding for school-based crime prevention is modest compared to that spent on control strategies unrelated to school, such as policing and new prisons. And among the school-based programs and strategies that have been tried, some have proven ineffective at reducing crime, including the widely popular anti-drug program, D.A.R.E.

The good news is that studies reveal several effective school-based strategies and several others with the potential to significantly reduce juvenile crime and help children become more resilient to the risks that can lead to delinquency.

Four reports in this edition of *Children, Youth & Family* background are devoted to school-based crime prevention. This report looks at the scope of

related reports

Prevention Strategies

School-based crime prevention is no longer limited to installing metal detectors at the door. For a look at commonly used strategies, see Report 18.

What Works

From behavior modification to changing the decision-making structures of schools, several crime prevention approaches have been found to be effective. For an overview of what works, see Report 19.

What Doesn't Work

Not all school-based crime prevention strategies are effective, including one of the most popular programs found in schools today. For a review of the least effective prevention approaches, see Report 20.

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juvenile crime in America and several of the factors, many of them related to school, that increase the likelihood of children developing criminal behavior.

A Stubborn Problem

Recently, there have been encouraging signs. Decreasing juvenile crime rates, even among serious crime, have been reported.

But even considering recent reductions, juvenile crime rates hover at historically-high levels. The latest ten-year juvenile crime numbers are sobering.

- From 1987-1996, juvenile murder arrests increased by 50.5%, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports. Robbery arrests increased 57.4%, and arrests for aggravated assault increased 70.2%. Arrests for forcible rape – the only violent crime category in which juvenile arrests declined over the 10-year period – fell by only 2.7%.

- Juvenile arrests in all crime categories rose 35.4% to 1,892,312 in 1996, up from 1,398,050 in 1987.

- Juveniles were responsible for 13% of the nation's violent crime in 1996 compared to 9% in 1987, based on case clearance data reported in the Uniform Crime Reports.

- Juvenile courts handled 1,714,300 delinquency cases in 1996, a 45% increase over 1987 caseloads, according the U.S. Justice Department estimates.

Juvenile crime is a stubborn problem. To be effective, prevention efforts must strike at the root of the problem and address factors in the lives of children and youths that tend to lead them down the path to delinquency and crime.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics that are associated with higher rates of delinquency and crime. Risk factors may not directly lead to delinquent behavior. But research has found that certain factors, when present, increase the likelihood of a child engaging in delinquent behavior.

Numerous factors increase the likelihood of delinquency and crime. They range from psychological characteristics, such as hyperactivity and concentration problems, to family-related circumstances, such as abuse, family conflict, and low family income.

In addition, several risk factors are related to schools.

- **Low academic achievement** is a consistently-reported risk factor. In one study, 20% of the boys identified as low academic achievers in elementary school ended up being convicted of a violent crime as an adult – nearly twice the rate of other students.

- **Poor attendance**, **low attachment to school**, and **low commitment to schooling** are also factors that increase the likelihood of delinquency.

- School environment factors that influence crime include the **availability of drugs**, **alcohol**, and **weapons**, as well as characteristics of the classroom and school, such as the **strength of academic mission** and **administrative leadership**.

- Having **delinquent peers** contributes to the spread of violence during adolescence. On the other hand, peers who disapprove of delinquent behavior may inhibit later violence.

- **Gang membership** is a serious risk factor for crime.

- **Acceptance of problem behaviors** places children at higher risk of engaging in them. In elementary school, children usually express anti-drug and anti-crime attitudes. But in middle school, when others they know engage in problem behaviors, children's attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance of those behaviors.

- Risks also increase for children with **poor social competency skills**. These skills include being able to identify consequences of actions and alternative solutions to problems, taking the perspective of others, and correctly interpreting social cues.

Children who fall into delinquency and crime usually have several risk factors working against them, not just one, a fact that complicates an already complicated problem of constructing effective prevention programs. As accompanying reports show, the more risk factors a prevention strategy addresses, more likely it will be effective in reducing juvenile crime.

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references

This report was based on the following publications:

Gottfredson, D.C. (In press). School-based crime prevention. In L.W. Sherman, D.C. Gottfredson, D. MacKenzie, J. Eck, P. Reuter, S. Bushway (Eds.), *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising. A Report to the United States Congress.* (Available on-line at www.preventingcrime.org).