Juvenile Justice Programs

A summary of the scientific literature on juvenile justice programs.



How This Impacts Children's Development

Many interventions and policies intended to reduce delinquents' criminal behavior have had the unintended consequence of increasing antisocial behavior. Evidence-based interventions have the potential to better

serve juvenile offenders, their families, and communities.

READ THE BRIEF: Juvenile Justice: Supporting Effective, Sounds Programs, 2011

Talking Points from the SRCD Brief

- Interventions and policies meant to reduce criminal behavior but that have been shown to increase antisocial behavior include processing juvenile offenders through the juvenile justice system, transferring them to adult court, shock incarceration programs (e.g., Scared Straight), and placements in residential facilities.
- Surveillance of juvenile offenders, including probation and parole, doesn't seem to be detrimental, but there is limited and mixed evidence of benefits.
- Interventions like processing juveniles through the justice system, transferring them to adult court, shock incarceration (e.g., Scared Straight), and residential placements often increase antisocial behavior. In contrast, effective programs include Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), which focus on family and community-based solutions to reduce recidivism.
- Effective youth intervention programs are rehabilitative and use intervention techniques within youths' natural environments.
- As of 2011, only 5% of eligible high-risk offenders currently are treated in programs that have been proven by rigorous research to be effective.

Policy Considerations in the Brief

1. Policymakers could fund, implement, and monitor delinquency, drug, and violence-prevention and intervention programs that have been rigorously evaluated. These programs should:
    - Be rehabilitative in nature, addressing such risk factors as improving the ways family's function and decreasing youth's association with deviant peers.
    - Use techniques that are behavioral (such as rewarding prosocial youth behavior and teaching more effective parenting practices) and cognitive behavior (such as developing problem-solving skills), and that take place within youths' natural environments to improve how youths and their family's function.

    - Be community-based, with practitioners aiming to address identified problems where they occur—in homes, neighborhoods, and school settings.
    - Include intensive support and monitoring to ensure that their quality and effectiveness are sustained when replicated in community settings.
2. The Federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) can help establish a context for a more scientific approach to the treatment of youths in the juvenile justice system.

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