

**The Bill Blackwood
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Programs for At-Risk Juveniles

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ABSTRACT

Programs for at-risk youth have been around since the late 1990's due to society's interest in the growing crime rate and delinquent conduct of our youth. The early failures of these programs prompted several studies across the country to determine the value youth programs have on helping at-risk youth becoming successful contributing members of society. Research looked in depth in all aspects of youth programs ranging from monetary value of saving high-risk youth, substance abuse prevention, participation, effects programs had on at-risk youth, what elements successful programs implemented, and what types of programs attract the diverse group of young adolescents. Because of these studies researchers were able to identify what works to attract and keep at-risk youth engaged with these programs long term. Studies also support that high quality at-risk youth programs should be implemented throughout the country because of the positive findings from research of these programs over the last two decades.

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INTRODUCTION

Research has shown at-risk juveniles who are not supervised in a structured environment are more likely to participate in delinquent conduct (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). According to Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, and Connell (2009,) before 2009, the government had invested approximately five billion dollars in programs targeting at risk youth. The monetary commitment emphasizes the importance society places on the problem of juvenile delinquency and criminal involvement. The majority of juvenile arrests are made during the hours between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. This time frame supports studies that suggest that at-risk youth needs supervision during the after-school hours to prevent participation in criminal behavior (Cross et al., 2009; Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997). Bilchik's (2009) The "silver bullet" reaction to deal with the fast-growing rise in youth criminal activity during 1980's and 1990's failed because it was a knee jerk reaction merely throwing government money at the problem but not focusing on factors to make after-school programs successful. Due to a significant amount of early failures of at-risk youth programs, society and government took a closer look at why the programs were failing at-risk youth. As a result, several studies were conducted, and programs were evaluated to see what changes, strategies, and elements can be implemented to make the programs more effective. Through significant research the foundation was laid to create high quality at-risk youth programs. In low income communities, the high-quality at-risk youth programs have dramatically improved at-risk youth academic results and self-confidence.

Government and society want at-risk youth off the street and learning skills that will promote sound decision making and positive outcomes in the future; however, factors need to be examined to identify what makes a good program for at-risk youth. The answer to this question is common sense. For at-risk programs to be successful, the results would have to reflect helping young people develop strong positive relationships with adults and peers in addition to giving them challenges they can rise to. The programs will build on the youths' strengths and not weaknesses. At-risk youth programs will also range in options from creativity, athletics, academics, culinary arts, etc. Programs will also help youth develop leadership and decision-making skills. Finally, at-risk youth programs have to be long term, so participation can be sustained.

Because of the unique position of home, school, and home environment after school programs play a large role to help focus youth on removing themselves from environments that facilitate risky behavior. At-risk after school youth programs also provide juveniles a safe place where free meals and tutoring are available to youth from low income communities. Several benefits of at-risk youth after school programs have been identified.

One benefit is the programs help the child develop positive social skills needed to be successful as an adult. Next, academic achievement improves for participants in these programs. Substance abuse among attendees has shown to decrease in participants of youth programs. Also, at-risk youth who attend these programs are less likely to join a gang or be involved in violent behavior. High quality programs for at-risk juveniles should be implemented across the nation.

POSITION

According to Cohen (1998) early programs aimed at high risk youth were created to prevent youth from dropping out of school, committing crime, using illegal substances, and any other type of delinquency or criminal behavior. Research has debated the monetary value of saving high-risk youth. In an example if one million dollars in funding was available for a high-risk youth program which prevented just four youths from being career offenders the program would pay for itself after looking at the long-term cost on society.

Cohen (1998) used data research to conclude that high school graduation incentive programs costed approximately \$11,816.00 per student in 1998. The research supported that this program would need a positive outcome of from three to five percent of its participants to be cost effective. Delinquent supervision programs for high-risk youth valued at \$10,000.00 per student would only need a success rate of one in 1,000 youth to break even. Another example was if a two-year program for 100 students costed society \$5,000.00 per student a total benefit of 1.7 to 2.3 million dollars would be created if it prevented just one juvenile in school and preventing him/her using drugs and engaging in criminal activity. In 1998 societal costs for a high-risk youth becoming a career criminal was approximately 1.3 to 1.5 million per offender. If the offender was a drug addict and addition \$370,000 to \$970,000 will be added. Additionally, a youth who drops out of school costs society approximately \$243,000 to \$388,000.

Cohen and Piquero (2009) performed a new study of the monetary value of saving a high-risk youth because of the inclining interest in youth crime prevention due

to increasing participation by juveniles. During this research the same methodology was used by Cohen (1998) to compare the new value placed on saving a high-risk youth. The average monetary value to save a high-risk youth was found to be somewhere between 2.6 and 5.3 million dollars (Cohen & Piquero, 2009). In 2008, the early stages of juvenile criminal participation societal costs were approximately \$65,000 per offender by the age of twelve. The costs increased to approximately \$230,000 by the age of 14. Cohen and Piquero (2009) found that even though the youth offender costs are low in the initial stages, society can save tremendously if programs are able to deter high risk youth from becoming career offenders.

The next point that supports programs for at-risk youth is a result of the following research. Illinois State University conducted a study to see the effects of cognitive behavioral programs (Jump Start Program) for at-risk juveniles on probation (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011). The study looked specifically at 86 participating at-risk youth on probation and 86 youth on probation who did not participate in the program. A Youth Assessing Screening Instrument (YASI) was used to gather data for this research. YASI recognizes risk factors in ten different categories of the youth subjects past. The ten areas examined were past criminal behavior, family life, school and education, community and peers, substance abuse, mental health, aggressive or violent behavior, criminal attitudes, social skills, and how unsupervised time is spent. The study had 59 male subjects and 27 female subjects with an average age of 15.28 years old. No subject was under 12 or older than 17. The average age of non-participants was 15.38 years old with a minimum and maximum of 11 and 18 years old. The study also had a diverse range of ethnicity (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

Results between participants and non-participants were compared in several different areas with the first being school participation. In the group of youth participating in the programs twelve students obtained a high school diploma, 17 dropped out of school, two were expelled, and the rest remained enrolled in school with six unaccounted for. In the group of youth not participating in the programs eight students obtained a high school diploma, 15 dropped out of school, seven were expelled and the rest remained enrolled in school. They noted not much difference in this category (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

The next category examined was attitudes. Juveniles who participated in the programs showed exceptional growth in attitude by not only scoring better in the category but showing the ability to understand consequences related to criminal behavior and respect for authority figures. The participating juveniles also showed a readiness for change related to poor attitudes. Non-participating juveniles also showed improvement in attitudes; however, they did not show the growth of understanding consequences as mentioned with the participating group (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

The third category examined was social skills. Social Skills for juveniles participating in the program revealed a recognized improvement. Social Skills for juveniles not participating in the program also revealed a recognized improvement. Researchers believed that the improvements in both groups were related to guidance by juvenile probation officers working with offenders teaching them good social skills (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

Finally, juveniles participating in the programs showed overall improvement in both family relationships and community/peer relationships (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011). The non-participating juveniles did not show any recognized improvement in either category. The interesting fact was male juveniles showed recognized improvement in the three categories attitude, social skills, and community relationships. Female juveniles only showed improvement in two categories of social skills and community/peer relationship. The research revealed that although improvements were made that every juvenile is different and what might work for one subject may not be the right for another. It was recommended that the government should look for or create programs based on gender specific needs (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

According to Nicholson, Collins and Holmer (2004), youth programs play a critical role in the overall development of youth in communities. It is argued that these programs need to focus on diversity, culture, be non-discriminatory, and provide a safe place for future generations to have a meaningful future. Due to more and more families having multiple family members working children are often left alone in the after school hours which leaves children becoming their own decision makers for present and the future. Youth responds when they are listened to and respected as valuable members of society. Programs are more effective for the development of youth by not doing for but working with young people to attain program goals (Nicholson et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the old programs established in the late 1990's failed and did not work because they focused to retain juveniles in high-risk areas. When initial programs were implemented they addressed specific problems and did not have the diversity to attract youth. When new programs are diverse, and juveniles want to attend these

programs research has found successful programs include several common characteristics. The characteristics are identified as having a strong community involvement, committed staff that create a good learning place for the youth, and frequent self-evaluation to see how the youth are liking the programs (Nicholson et al., 2004).

This approach to foster youth participation in development programs turned attention to creating various to different types of programs that will attract the diverse youth. The first types of programs some youth are attracted to fall under the education field which can range from science, technology, engineering, mathematics, fine arts, and career development. The next type of programs to attract youth promote physical and positive health which include after school sports, substance abuse prevention, and healthy eating habits. The final areas discussed for programs to attract youth are geared toward community involvement which include volunteering for community events or tutoring, mentoring new youth after program completion, and research to improve their communities (Nicholson et al., 2004).

Evidence is overwhelming that high-quality youth programs use the above recommendations have positive outcomes for both the participants of the programs and the communities implementing them. As expensive as studies and research for evaluating these programs it allows society to identify what changes to be made to better serve youth moving forward. Research also give youth a voice in society to show what programs are working and what programs are not.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Opposition will say one issue which produces failure with juvenile after school programs is that high risk juveniles do not want to voluntarily participate in these after school programs because the programs do not have characteristics that would influence at risk juvenile participation. High risk youth are the ones who benefit the most from these programs but are not attending because the participation is voluntary (Cross et al., 2009). This lack of policy, proper implementation, structure, and diversity of these after-school programs are all contributed to the failure of after-school programs across the country.

Weisman and Gottfredson (2001) found a large number of participants of after-school programs are youth who are not high-risk juveniles; therefore, the programs are not connecting with those youth who need the most supervision during the afterschool hours. The study suggested that these practices are creating public distrust and wasting tax payers hard earned money. Efforts must be made to attract high-risk juveniles if after school programs are going to draw the audience that is going to benefit the most from these types of after school programs. As Osgood, Anderson, and Shaffer (2005) conclude, after school programs can only prevent delinquency if high-risk youth choose to attend these programs instead of participating in juvenile delinquent behavior.

However according to Vandell, Reisnor, and Pierce (2007), a two-year study was conducted by the University of California that documented results of almost 3,000 elementary and junior high age juveniles from low income, ethnically diverse, large cities from different locations spread out across the nation. The programs were open

four to five days a week and did not charge students who voluntarily participated and targeted areas of high-risk youth. The programs were also implemented with the support of the community and parents to make sure the organizations could withstand the two-year window. Over the course of the two years the data was logged on participation and results for both elementary age students and middle school age students (Vandell et al., 2007).

According to this study, 54 percent of the elementary school aged kids attended the after-school programs on a regular basis. Because of participation elementary aged youths had better math test scores than those who did not attend. In addition, this group showed a significant decrease of bad behavior and reports of misconduct. Forty-nine percent of the middle school-aged students attended the after-school programs on a regular basis. Middle school-aged juveniles also had better math scores compared to those who did not participate. Middle school students participating in the programs showed more work habit initiative and less use of drugs and alcohol (Vandell et al., 2007).

Another argument from opposition and more concerning about after-school programs is the programs might create an environment that encourages juveniles to participate in delinquent or criminal behavior. When large programs are understaffed, unstructured, and lack adult supervision participants have time to socialize and with other at-risk youth which allows them to plan criminal or delinquent behavior. (Capaldi, 2009; Osgood, Anderson, & Shaffer, 2004). The majority of youth are usually arrested with peers when participating in delinquent or criminal behavior. (Capaldi, 2009; Aultman, 1980). It should be noted that programs lacking staff, structure, and

supervision allows high-risk youths to congregate in a setting that promotes the participation in delinquent or criminal behavior which ultimately results in after-school program failure.

In response, research shows approximately 600,000 juveniles must go to the emergency room yearly because of injuries related to violence (Forster, Grigsby, Unger, & Sussman 2015). Among the youth who have committed a violent assault prior to turning 17 years of age, approximately 40 percent males and 30 percent females have been the suspect. Research has also shown as of 2015 there are somewhere between 700,000 and 1,000,000 juvenile gang members (Forster et al., 2015).

Forster et al. (2015) did a cross-sectional data study of participants, measures, and demographics. The demographics the participants were surveyed on involved social self-control, family in gangs, friends in gangs, violence exposure, interpersonal aggression and perceived likelihood for future aggression. Because of this study, it identified multiple factors to help with intervening and preventing violence amongst at-risk youth.

Research also identified school programs as an important factor in stopping the cycle of criminal behavior if implemented correctly. Forster et al. (2015) suggests schools in areas with elevated crime and gang activity meet the needs of their students by teaching ways to reduce tension during social interactions and build on prosocial behavior could drastically drop the effects of negative peer pressure and future gang participation. According to the research for violence prevention youths need the opportunity to openly discuss what is going on in their lives in addition the social support of the programs.

RECOMMENDATION

High quality at-risk youth programs with community support should be implemented throughout the country. One of the strongest cases that support this statement is the monetary value to society when a high-risk youth is saved. Research has confirmed that although programs for at-risk youth cost a tremendous amount of money, the long-term value attributed to a juvenile becoming a career offender has a significantly larger monetary impact to society over the course of the offender's life (Cohen & Piquero, 2009).

Quality at-risk youth programs prevent criminal behavior, substance abuse, gang involvement, violent tendencies, and juvenile recidivism. The positive effects of these programs include higher grades, improved social skills with community and peers, provide a safe environment for youth during high risk hours after school, and teach youth valuable skills to thrive as an adult (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

Oposing research suggests that at-risk do not attend available youth programs due to the programs being voluntary and not mandatory (Cross et al., 2009). Opposition also argues youth programs may even promote criminal or delinquent behavior from high-risk youth associating with peers in an unsupervised environment. While these arguments have some teeth to them new research discovered a large population of at-risk youth chose to attend these programs voluntarily with positive outcomes. Studies also confirmed that attending and completing these programs promote a reduction in criminal behavior (Kethineni & Braithwaite, 2011).

New programs for at-risk youth should focus on diversity, culture, be non-discriminatory, and provide a safe place for participants to grow and learn. The

programs should have a strong community involvement, committed staff that create a good learning place for the youth, and frequent self-evaluation to evaluate the effectiveness within each community (Vandell et al., 2007).

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