



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Youth Afterschool Programs and Law Enforcement

A Summary of a Presentation by Marcia Chaiken, Ph.D.

Comprehensive child development relies on the supports, relationships, and activities available to children at home, at school, and in the community. However, from early adolescence through the mid-teenage years, peer influence competes with that of family, and about 60 percent of a youth's waking hours are spent outside of school. Thus, an opportunity to significantly affect the direction and quality of young lives resides in the community.

Recent findings show that children and teens are most vulnerable either to committing or being a victim of crime between 2:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Community organizations with afterschool youth development programs are particularly well positioned to counter some of the hazards that threaten children, particularly urban adolescents: drug abuse, gang activity, and criminal involvement or victimization.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York jointly supported a national survey of youth-serving organizations to discover the dimensions of crime affecting these organizations during nonschool hours and what approaches they are using to prevent such crime. The survey, conducted by LINC and seven national youth organizations and their local affiliates, found that local affiliates of national organizations are serving many children and teenagers who are at high risk for crime and delinquency and, to the extent that these local affiliates are themselves imperiled by crime and violence, they are likely to enlist police assistance in implementing prevention programs.

Survey Methods

Questionnaires were sent to a stratified random sample of more than 1,000 program directors and volunteers, with a 47-percent response rate. The principal reason for nonresponse was high staff turnover. About half the responding organizations were in big cities with high crime rates, about one-quarter were in big cities with relatively low crime rates, and one-quarter came from small cities and towns. The majority of organizations were providing programs in youth centers or clubs, churches or other religious facilities, and schools.

Findings

What children need and want. Previous research has shown that the most successful programs are those that address comprehensive child and adolescent development, which rests on the guidance and bonds that children may find at home, at school, and in the community. However, in communities where many children have fewer supports at home and school, there are also fewer youth-serving organizations in the neighborhoods to meet their needs. Whether teens and children live in inner cities or smaller towns, they told researchers they want afterschool programs that provide challenging activities and a chance to contribute to their communities. Young people prefer programs that provide a range of choices—sports and recreation, activities that bolster their educational and social skills, activities that increase their ability to say “No” when faced with temptation, and computer and other technical instruction. They also want

places where they can be safe during afterschool hours—where there are no gangs, weapons, or crime.

The survey found that national youth-serving organizations are recruiting children and teens who are at high risk for crime and delinquency and attracting extraordinarily large numbers in economically depressed areas. These young people want adult leaders who know children and who understand what it is like to live in neighborhoods where violence is rife.

Crime. Program sites are facing formidable problems from crime. During the 1993–1994 program year, over half the organizations had at least one criminal incident involving a staff member, participant, or property. Vandalism was the most frequent problem reported. However, almost a quarter said some violent crime had been committed.

Within the 1993–1994 program year, 2 percent of the organizations reported that participants brought guns to the program area, almost 4 percent reported that participants brought drugs, and 7 percent reported that participants brought weapons. Ten percent of the organizations reported that they took action—either suspending or expelling a participant—because they committed other crimes. Seven percent of the organizations reported that a participant or staff member had been attacked with a weapon. Thirty-nine percent said that a participant had committed a crime at the program site. Nonparticipating youths, however, were committing the majority of crimes. Only 4 percent said they try to keep out kids who are bringing in problems.

Police involvement. The survey showed that organizations most affected by crime are reaching out to their police departments not just when a crime occurs but to implement preventive approaches. Program directors most frequently asked police departments to provide an officer “just one time” to talk with the children about drugs, crime, and other topics.

Youth-serving organizations that receive services they request from their police are experiencing significantly less crime than those with less responsive police departments. Police have been most responsive in communities that have formed broad coalitions among youth-serving organizations and community volunteers, and that have made it clear that a safe, productive place for children during nonschool hours is a vital community need.

Three case-study sites provide examples of effective partnerships between youth-serving organizations and police departments:

- In Arlington, Texas, a teen center has recruited participants who are members of different youth gangs. Together, participants decided to leave their gang paraphernalia—weapons, colors, and signs—outside. Police assured apprehensive neighbors they would help keep things calm.
- In Bristol, Connecticut, police collaborate with youth organizations to bring schools, probation and parole departments, and families together when a child or teen breaks the law.
- In Spokane, Washington, leaders of youth organizations and the police department went door-to-door, got together people who once were afraid to go outside their homes, and helped them take back their community.

Implications

National youth-serving organizations play a key role in teaching young people skills to become responsible members of their communities. The local affiliates of these organizations are serving many children and teens least likely to learn these skills anywhere else. Although crime is a barrier to serving these young people, police are helping to provide safe and productive places during nonschool hours. Evidence from police departments in the three case-study sites shows that these communities are experiencing lower rates of crime after actively involving adolescents in these organizations, and the children and teens being served feel they are contributing to the community.

This Research Preview is based on a presentation by Marcia Chaiken, Ph.D., Director of Research at LINC, a private research organization based in Alexandria, Virginia.

As part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Chaiken discussed her study with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, "Youth Afterschool Programs and the Role of Law Enforcement," is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 163057.

Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

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