



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Evaluation of Boys and Girls Clubs in Public Housing

For the children living in America's inner-city public housing, few alternatives to the streets exist. Nearly every organization and institution that could serve as a focal point for crime and drug-abuse prevention, healthy child development, and community recovery has relocated or disappeared. The Boys and Girls Clubs in Public Housing program is a part of Operation Weed and Seed, a comprehensive multiagency approach to law enforcement and community revitalization. Weed and Seed was created to break the cycle of drugs, violence, and crime (weeding) and to develop an integrated network of educational, medical, and social services (seeding).

Through a partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), the Bureau of Justice Assistance sponsored 22 demonstration projects in public housing. These BGCA programs at Weed and Seed sites (funded for 12 months) have focused on raising educational achievement, opening access to medical services, and establishing new clubs offering extensive social, educational, and medical services. A National Institute of Justice evaluation of the implementation of these programs found that the most promising approaches actively sought out partnerships with a broad range of public and private agencies, employed an experienced coordinator, enlisted existing community resources, and built trust among residents.

Study method

Researchers reviewed 15 projects; they examined youth case management records; observed BGCA activities; and interviewed club directors, project directors, project staff, program participants, parents of program participants, law enforcement personnel, school representatives, community members, and representatives from agencies and organizations participating in the demonstration projects.

Comprehensive medical programs

Five of the programs attempted comprehensive medical

services, emphasizing health education, screening, and access to medical services. Major challenges were securing the trust of neighborhood youths and residents wary of public health agencies and finding adequate resources.

What worked. The most promising program formed a partnership with the State department of health to obtain partial funding, assistance in hiring a public health nurse, technical assistance, and supervision for maintaining medical records and clinic operations. Also important was finding an energetic, experienced coordinator and staff to identify health care needs and to design strategies persuading residents to seek health services. The most effective strategy was a door-to-door canvass to elicit participation in health care assessments.

Educational enhancement efforts

Five BGCA programs focused on educational enhancement. These programs used a "high yield" approach in which children were given extensive opportunity outside of school to practice reading, writing, verbal communication, problem solving, and decisionmaking.

What worked. For programs reporting increased enthusiasm for and participation in educational activities, an active and well-organized coordinator was a crucial factor. A strong coordinator served as an effective liaison with schools and, most importantly, aggressively sought to address parental apathy and lack of involvement—the single biggest obstacle to any program's success. Another key factor was the active support of school administrators and teachers, who reinforced educational enhancement activities in the classroom.

New "full-service" clubs

The evaluation also assessed five new BGCA clubs designed to offer a broad but intensive mix of services to establish a positive, stable community resource.

What worked. The success or failure of new clubs was linked directly to their ability to network in the community and coordinate their activities for youths with existing community-based service providers, including other Weed and Seed efforts. Programs showing the most promise invested considerable time and energy building trust and acceptance among local children, parents, teachers, community leaders, law enforcement agencies, corporations, and community institutions that could provide vital financial resources, volunteers, and other support.

Improving youth services in public housing

Although all clubs achieved some level of success in meeting the goals they set, analysis of those with lower levels of achievement revealed the following suggestions for improvements:

Long-term programming. Clubs should develop clear, long-term objectives. Programs of short duration may raise expectations, and when they end, participants may become cynical about any future efforts. Therefore, consideration should be given to multiple-year funding or spreading limited funding over longer periods. Proposals should include a plan for continuing operations after a particular grant terminates.

Needs assessment. Clubs should work with local schools, law enforcement agencies, and residents to determine which youths are most at risk and what services they need.

Staff training. Even programs with adequate funding are only as good as the staff who run them. Club staff must not only be enthusiastic but competent in their roles. Staff also must be extensively trained in accurate record keeping.

Coordination of activities. To avoid turf battles and duplication of services, each club should develop cooperative relationships with other agencies and organizations. This issue is of special concern in providing medical services, where support of local hospitals and public health authorities must be developed.

Use of incentives in educational enhancements. Although a powerful motivator, use of incentives should be placed in the context of the overall program, and they should not drive participation.

New program in a new site. Establishing both a new club and a new program simultaneously can be overwhelming. It may be advisable to focus first on obtaining residents' trust to establish the club before networking with outside community groups (schools, police, etc.) to initiate specific services.

Weed vs. seed. Programs should be sensitive to residents' mistrust of overly aggressive law enforcement practices. A healthy balance must be struck between suppressing criminal activity and rebuilding communities.

The full unpublished report on this study, prepared under NIJ grant 92-DD-CX-K038, *Boys and Girls Clubs in Public Housing*, by Carl E. Pope, Ph.D., Timothy S. Bynum, Ph.D., Jack R. Greene, Ph.D., and William H. Feyerherm, Ph.D., is available through interlibrary loan or as photocopies from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000; call 800-851-3420 or e-mail: askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com. Ask for NCJ 156389.

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