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A VALIDATION STUDY**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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**State of California  
Department of the Youth Authority  
Research Division**

**July 1994**

**CALIFORNIA'S JUVENILE PROBATION CAMPS:  
A VALIDATION STUDY**

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by

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**State of California  
Department of the Youth Authority  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

This study is an adjunct to the California Juvenile Probation Camps Study, which began in 1984. At that time, 23 of the 58 counties operated one or more probation camps, with a total of 53 camps statewide. These camps provided the juvenile court with a dispositional alternative for offenders for whom out-of-home placement was deemed appropriate but Youth Authority commitment was not. Thus, California's juvenile probation camps are non-state-mandated, county operated programs that are part of the range of services offered by a number of probation departments.

In 1983, the Chief Probation Officers of California asked the Department of the Youth Authority to study California's juvenile probation facilities. That study had three major goals: (1) describe the youths who are served by camps and describe the main features of those facilities, including program and staff; (2) compare the camp's youth population with other justice system populations; and (3) study camp effectiveness with respect to, but not limited to, recidivism. No recent, comprehensive data on California's probation camps existed at the time in these areas, and it was believed that a systematic, up-to-date description and objective assessment could help decision makers optimally utilize camp resources.

The California Juvenile Probation Camps Study, sometimes called the Camps, Ranches, and Schools Study, achieved its major goals. (Highlights are shown below.) In connection with goal 3, the study identified several types of camps that had significantly lower recidivism or state commitment rates than other camps. Since this finding had implications for public protection, camp programming, and possibly state institutional populations, it was decided that a further study—the present validation study—was needed. The overall purpose of this study was to determine if key findings from the first study were reliable. If those findings held up with a new

sample of probationers, this would increase the confidence that policy makers and administrators could place in those results.

Reliable information about the effectiveness of probation camps is important because these facilities are one of the major sanctions and alternatives available within the juvenile justice system. In 1992, for instance, California's juvenile probation camps had an average daily population of 3,600. Youths are committed to camps after the courts have determined that their offense or pattern of offenses is unacceptable to or a threat to the community, and that the youths should be removed from the community for some time. As a result, a commitment to these camps is often the last local alternative preceding a commitment to the Youth Authority. In 1992, there were 13,800 commitments to juvenile probation camps. Without these facilities, admissions to Youth Authority institutions would almost certainly increase.

### **Design and Results of the First Study**

The California Juvenile Probation Camps Study included all 3,774 youths who resided in the 53 juvenile probation camps that were operating in mid-1984. Case files, court records, Bureau of Criminal Statistics rap sheets, a survey completed by camp staff, and phone follow-ups were used. For comparative purposes, 2,113 randomly selected field probationers, court-ordered private placements, and juvenile hall commitments were also studied, as were 1,021 juvenile court wards under age 18 in Youth Authority institutions. For the evaluation of recidivism and state commitment rates, Los Angeles County and all counties other than Los Angeles (combined) were studied separately, because of differences in the characteristics of their camps as well as youths. Results of that study were presented in a series of reports from 1985 through 1989, and their highlights are as follows:

- Probation camps serve youths who have a wide range of personal or social adjustment problems. These problems include alcohol, drugs, psychiatric/psychological difficulties, gang involvement, weapons use, and physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Many camp youths may need multiple services to assist with those problems and with related environmental pressures.

- Camp youths are more seriously delinquent than field probationers and private placements but are less delinquent than individuals committed to state institutions.
- Probation camps offer a wide range of programs and activities, such as academic and vocational training, counseling, recreation, and religion. Also, camp programs are generally followed by several months of supervised aftercare, often in reduced or specialized caseloads.
- Camps provide immediate protection by removing youths from the community for an average of 5.5 months. During that time, 9% of camp youths escape (they usually walk away or do not return from furlough).
- Eighty-two percent of camp youths successfully complete their camp program and the remaining 18% are removed or transferred due to unsatisfactory behavior.
- Of all youths admitted to camp, 35% have no known sustained petitions or convictions for at least 24 months after successful completion or unsuccessful removal, and 71% are not committed to a state institution during that time. Conversely, the remaining 65% re-offend and 29% are committed to the state. ("Offense" means sustained petition in juvenile court and/or a conviction in adult court. These and the following post-camp results were based on a cohort of randomly selected youths in probation camps during 1982.)
- By comparing camps with each other, several sets of camp features were found to be associated with sizable differences in recidivism and state commitment among males: For all satisfactory program completers combined, these differences were usually 20 to 30%. If camps that currently have few such features could adopt more of them, their recidivism and commitment rates could be expected to decrease.

It was concluded that juvenile probation camps provide considerable immediate and longer-term public protection from youths who are often repeat offenders and whose communities feel should be incarcerated. The findings regarding camp features that were associated with lower recidivism and state commitment rates suggested possible ways to increase the amount of protection camps can provide.

### **The Present Study**

The specific goals of the validation study were as follows:

- compare recidivism and state commitment rates for the 1982 camp release cohort with those of a totally different sample of youths, released in 1984;
- determine if the camps that had more positive outcomes with the 1982 sample also had more positive outcomes with the 1984 release sample; and,

- identify one or more sets of camp characteristics (camp-types) related to better outcomes in both the 1982 and 1984 samples.

The latter was the study's main goal. Earlier findings that would hold up in the new study could be used with considerable confidence.

In implementing the present study, the earlier study was precisely replicated in as many ways as possible, for instance, in terms of definitions, sampling, data collection methods, and statistical analyses. The present, 1984 follow-up sample consisted of 2,140 randomly selected males from Los Angeles County and all counties other than Los Angeles, combined. (The 1982 follow-up sample contained 2,578 such males.) As had been done in the recidivism-rate and state commitment-rate analyses conducted during the first study, Los Angeles County, on the one hand, and counties other than Los Angeles, on the other, were routinely examined separately from each other. This was because they differed substantially on such factors as average rated capacity, average daily population, average length of stay, ratio of open to closed camps, and percentage of minority youths. They also differed on percentage of youths (a) committed for a person offense and (b) with either gang involvement, weapons use, or both, as part of their commitment offense. (Appendix A.)

## Findings

### Counties Other Than Los Angeles

Youth characteristics. Youths released in 1984 from probation camps in counties other than Los Angeles differed slightly but significantly from 1982 releases from those same camps.

For instance, the 1984 youths:

- had fewer pre-camp ("prior") sustained petitions
- had lower risk-of-recidivism scores
- were older when released from camp.

In general, the 1984 group had been less involved in delinquency than the 1982 group, prior to entering camp; and, based on their risk-of-recidivism scores, they were considered less likely to engage in illegal behavior after their release from camp.

**Post-camp outcomes.** Consistent with the above findings and expectations, the 1984 releases from these camps had a significantly lower recidivism rate than the 1982 releases from those same camps, at 24-months follow-up: 57.5% vs. 64.7%. The 1984 youths' rate of commitment to state correctional facilities was lower than that of the 1982 youths as well, again at 24-months follow-up: 16.0% vs. 20.0%.

**Types of camps.** In the original probation study (Wedge & Palmer, 1989), several types of camps were identified which differed from other camps in their particular combination of program features as well as other characteristics. It was found that youths who were released in 1982 from those several types of camps in counties other than Los Angeles had significantly lower recidivism rates, state commitment rates, or both, than 1982 releases from the other camps—camps which either lacked the first set of camps' particular combination of characteristics or which exhibited those features to a substantially lesser degree.

The present study's examination of camp-types centered on releases from the same probation camps during 1984, from counties other than Los Angeles. In this 1984 study, four types of camps which, in 1982, were more successful than other camps with the 1982 releases were again found to have significantly lower recidivism rates, state commitment rates, or both, than other 1984 camps which lacked the former camps' combination of characteristics or which had those features to a lesser degree. (The examination of camp-types was done separately for youths classified as "higher," "medium," and "lower" risks. These risk levels referred to the youths' likelihood of recidivating. Each youth's recidivism risk was computed on the basis of a statistically derived scale whose components were age at first sustained petition, number of prior sustained petitions, and number of prior institutional commitments. Previous research had shown that these three variables were related to rate of recidivism.)

For instance, in the case of "higher-risk" youths (that is, individuals whose lengthier prior record and whose lower age at first offense made them the ones most likely to recidivate after their release from camp): The average difference in recidivism for youths released in 1984 from the two types of camps that were more successful with these higher-risk youths than were other camps was 16.5 percentage points at 24-months post-camp follow-up. (This equaled a 21.7% difference in recidivism.) That is, the average recidivism rate for higher-risk youths released from these camps in 1984 was 16.5 percentage points lower than that of 1984 releases from camps which did not have the first camps' combination of features or which had them to a lesser degree. For higher-risk releases in the 1982 sample, the difference in recidivism rates between those camps was 20.7 percentage points (a 24.9% difference).

Similarly, the following was found for "lower-risk" youths—individuals who were considered least likely to recidivate: The average recidivism difference within the types of 1984 camps that were more successful with these youths than were other 1984 camps was 17.6 percentage points at 24-months post-camp follow-up (this equaled a 32.9% difference in recidivism). For lower-recidivism-risk youths who were released in 1982, the average recidivism difference was 23.1 percentage points (a 42.4% difference).

One of the successful types of camps from counties other than Los Angeles was distinguished in terms of its degree of physical activities and community contact. This camp-type gave above-average emphasis to recreational activities, work activities inside the camp, and activities as well as visits outside the camp. It had a single living-unit (rather than multiple units) and a longer-than-average length of stay. In this type of camp the higher-risk youths had lower recidivism rates than did higher-risk youths in camps whose characteristics and/or emphases were different. It should be emphasized that the characteristics which were associated with lower recidivism rates—for instance, type of living-unit and length of stay—operated in combination with each other rather than separately. This means that no one characteristic, if operating by itself, would necessarily have been associated with lower recidivism rates. (Other analyses, in

fact, indicated that some characteristics had opposite results, depending on the particular features with which they were combined.) This applies to the following results as well.

Another successful type of camp from counties other than Los Angeles was distinguished in terms of academic training and—again—community contacts. This camp gave above-average emphasis to academic training and to activities as well as visits outside the camp. These smaller-than-average camps were in rural settings and they had an above-average length of stay. Though they had a higher-than-average ratio of staff to youths they also made above-average use of volunteers (in terms of monthly hours expended). In this type of camp, higher-risk youths had a lower state commitment rate than higher-risk youths in camps whose features or emphases were different.

The remaining types of comparatively successful camps from counties other than Los Angeles are described in the text of the report for those counties (Wedge & Palmer, 1994a).

### Los Angeles County

Youth characteristics. Youths released from Los Angeles County camps in 1984 were similar, on the large majority of characteristics, to youths released from those same camps in 1982. The two samples had about the same age and delinquent background, although a higher percentage of 1984 releases had a prior institutional commitment. The 1984 sample also contained a lower percentage of youths who were committed to camp for property offenses and more who were committed for drug-related and miscellaneous other offenses. The average risk-of-recidivism scores for the 1984 and 1982 samples were very similar: 3.8 vs. 3.7. All in all, however, the 1984 group seemed neither more nor less delinquent than the 1982 group, when they entered camp.

Post-camp characteristics. Consistent with the above findings, the 1984 releases from the Los Angeles County camps had a recidivism rate, on 24-months post-camp follow-up, which did not differ significantly from that of youths released from those same camps in 1982: 62.7% for the 1984 group and 59.0% for the 1982 group. The rate of commitment to state facilities was

also statistically similar at 24-months follow-up: 31.5% for the 1984 group and 33.7% for the 1982 group.

**Types of camps.** The present study of camp-types centered on releases from Los Angeles County camps in 1984. It focused on the same camps whose 1982 releases had previously been examined. In the 1984 study, two types of camps which, in the 1982 study, were more successful than other camps with the 1982 releases were again found to have substantially lower recidivism rates, state commitment rates, or both, when compared to other 1984 camps which lacked the former camps' combination of characteristics or which had those features to a lesser degree.

Specifically, for all youths combined—that is, higher, medium, and lower risks together—the recidivism difference in the type of 1984 camp that was more successful than were other 1984 camps was 14.9 percentage points at 24 months post-camp follow-up (this equaled a 21.4% recidivism difference). For 1982 releases the difference was 15.7 percentage points. Again for all youths combined, the average difference in state commitment rates, for the 1984 releases, was 15.3 percentage points at 24-months follow-up (a 38.2% difference in commitments). For the 1982 releases the difference in commitment rates was 18.6 percentage points.

For higher-risk youths in the 1984 study, the recidivism difference in the type of camp that was more successful with these individuals than were other 1984 camps was 24.8 percentage points at 24-months post-camp follow-up (this equaled a 30.2% difference in recidivism). For higher-risk releases in the 1982 sample the difference was 34.6 percentage points. Similarly, for the 1984 releases who were lower-risks, the recidivism difference in the type of camp that was more successful with these individuals than were other 1984 camps was 18.5 percentage points (a 28.7% recidivism difference). For lower recidivism-risk youths who were released in 1982 the difference was 15.8 percentage points.

Of the two successful types of camps from Los Angeles County, one was distinguished by its relative richness of programming, that is, its above-average quantity of interaction and activity in each of several major components. Specifically, these camps were characterized by higher-

than-average amounts of counseling, academic training, physical activities, and community contact. In general, they were the smaller, less crowded camps, and their youths were housed in individual rooms rather than dorms. In addition, the youths were usually assigned to programs on a relatively individualized basis and they were more often present at their case reviews than were youths in other camps. Although the more successful camps also made more use of volunteers, they had fewer staff per youth than did other camps. These more successful camps had lower recidivism and lower state commitment rates, and they had lower recidivism rates for the higher-risk youths in particular. In addition, of all the camps that were compared with each other—including those from non Los Angeles counties—this was the only type of camp that had lower state commitment rates for medium-risk youths.

The other successful type of Los Angeles County camp was particularly distinguished by its above-average amount of counseling and, to a lesser degree, its higher-than average frequency of religious activities. These, too, were among the less crowded but not necessarily smaller-sized camps, and they had a longer-than-average length of stay (Wedge & Palmer, 1994b).

### **Conclusions**

Like the California's Juvenile Probation Camps Study, which was conducted during 1984-1989, the present validation study found that California's county juvenile probation camp system provides public protection not only through the incarceration and incapacitation of delinquent youth, but by reducing delinquent behavior during a 24-month period following completion of the camp program. The camp system also provides institutional programs for some youths who, in the absence of local camps and alternatives to those camps, would probably be committed to state institutions.

The present study, in particular, identified several "types" of camp programs that were also found in the 1984-1989 study to have recidivism and state commitment rates which were significantly and statistically lower than those in other camps. This validation of the previous

study's findings strongly suggests that existing camps which have higher recidivism or commitment rates could reduce those rates by adopting, where feasible, the characteristics of the more successful camp-types. Future probation camps might adopt such features from the start. Achieving lower recidivism rates would enhance public protection. By reducing incarceration rates it could probably lower correctional costs as well.

The present study also implies that practitioners, planners, and others should consider neither the youth's risk level nor the camp's program features independently of each other. Instead, they should view these dimensions as jointly related to the amount of post-program recidivism, and they should therefore consider them simultaneously when they are planning programs and when they are making decisions about individual youths or groups of youth. Evidence that youth characteristics interact with program features as well as program settings has existed for many years in correctional research literature, and it has been supported by the present study.

Finally, California's Juvenile Probation Camp Study and the present validation study generated several leads regarding possible directions for future probation camp research. For instance, future studies might include (a) detailed descriptions and follow-ups of the more successful types of camps, (b) experiments on the comparative effectiveness of successful probation camps and specialized or intensive community-based alternatives to camps, and (c) experiments on the comparative effectiveness of probation camps and Youth Authority programs for high recidivism-risk youths.

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For further information about the study or copies of reports, contact the authors at the Department of the Youth Authority, Research Division, 4241 Williamsborough Drive, Sacramento, California 95823. Phone: (916) 262-1493. FAX: (916) 262-2493.

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APPENDIX A

Selected Camp Characteristics for Counties Other Than Los Angeles,  
Los Angeles County, and Statewide—1982

Characteristics	Counties Other Than L.A.	Los Angeles County	Statewide
Avg. Rated Capacity	61	103	74
Avg. Daily Population	47	101	64
Avg. Length of Stay (Months)	5.2	6.2	5.5
No. of Open Camps	28	9	37
No. of Closed Camps	4	5	9
Approx. Ratio of Open to Closed Camps	7 to 1	2 to 1	4 to 1
Pct. of Minority Youths	54	79	66
Pct. Committed for Person Offense	22	32	26
Pct. with Gang Involvement in Commitment Offense	7	27	19
Pct. with Weapons Use in Commitment Offense	11	18	15