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Can Education Effectively Reduce Crime and Delinquency?

Fresno County's Youth and Law Class *

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INTRODUCTION

The Fresno County Probation Department's Youth Development and Community Education Unit grew out of the belief that delinquency could be discouraged or effectively reduced through exposure to accurate educational material about the juvenile justice system. Later, that belief was taken as the primary objective of what was to become the department's Youth and

* Special acknowledgment for the development and success of the Youth and Law program is given to the past members of the Youth Development and Community Education Unit—Paul Burgan, Supervisor; Dan Yohman and Stann Ness, and to present members—Richard Simonian, Supervisor; Keith Lusk and David Dawson. Recognition is further extended to Juvenile Division Director Donald W. Hudson, and to the Adult Division Community Education Officer Ronald Haun.

Law program and subsequently the Youth and Law class.

A preliminary study was authorized in 1974 and a single deputy probation officer was relieved of caseload duties and delegated to begin the process of transforming ideas into a functioning program. The first few months of the assignment were devoted to legal research and consultation with knowledgeable agency and community members as to the probable response of the community at large to the implementation of such an educational approach to be presented in the schools. Scores of legal documents dealing with juvenile law were also briefed to the end that all matters presented would be up-to-date and precisely accurate. Many community leaders and agency personnel provided valuable input to the program's development and from this initial venture several topics, believed to be of interest and value to young people, were settled upon.

Once the matter of program content was finalized, the next step was to decide upon the manner of presentation. After much thought, it was agreed that the selected material would be presented in two mutually supportive phases: lecture and slide presentation.

The oral or *lecture* portion of the program would include a history of juvenile court law from its beginning to its present form with a description of the juvenile justice system, including arrest and booking procedures, an overview of the activities generally known to lead young persons into the delinquency category, and finally, some brief explanations of particular sections of the California Education, Penal, Health and Safety, and Welfare and Institutions Code specifically relating to juveniles.

The *slide* portion of the program would depict a minor from the point of initial arrest through booking into juvenile hall, subsequent juvenile court proceedings, and possible dispositional alternatives such as C. K. Wakefield School (Fresno's institution for boys) and the California Youth Authority.

With all the preparatory work completed, the program still could not be implemented without the approval of county and city school officials. Contacts were made with the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools and the Fresno Unified School District Curriculum Committee in order that the program might be approved for presentation. Both found the concept and manner of presentation outstanding and permission to proceed was immediately given. With this encouraging acceptance, all junior and senior high schools within the Fresno area were notified by letter of the availability and content of the Youth and Law program.

During the initial year, the program was presented to 8,000 students representing approximately 80 schools.

The acceptance and impact of the program within the schools was so great that soon the demand for the services of the program manager exceeded his available time. Thus, in the second year of operation, school officials along with many private citizens supported the probation department's request before the Fresno County Board of Supervisors for another staff position for the program. The request was granted and the addition of the second officer resulted in a yearly output of approximately 350 separate presentations reaching more than 20,000 students. (These figures do not include the large number of presentations made to church groups, civic clubs and other organizations.)

During its formative years, numerous teachers, students and private citizens evaluated and commented on the Youth and Law program. Based on their suggestions, appropriate modifications of program content and method of presentation were adopted. A suggestion, which was frequently made, was that the program should be presented to parents as well as students. Since a large number of students had already been through the program, it was quite obvious that the program could not be presented to all their parents as the numbers would be staggering. With certain modifications, however, it was believed that the program could be brought to the parents of selected children involved with the juvenile justice system. From this modified approach, the Youth and Law class was developed during the summer of 1976.

BASIC CONCEPT

Before the Youth and Law class came into being, it was known that approximately 50% of all referrals to juvenile intake (or about 75 minors per month), received either on citation or as a result of law enforcement booking into juvenile hall, were closed at the intake level. The child was simply reprimanded and released with no further action taken. A recidivism study by the Fresno County Juvenile Hall revealed that recidivism for these types of cases was approaching 50%. With this study in mind, it was concluded that the rate of recidivism might be reduced by exposing these offenders, along with their parents, to an educational class. The class would also provide the intake probation officer with an additional alternative besides the traditional reprimand and release procedure. The class would inform the parents and the child of the consequences of further delinquent behavior and, thus, hopefully prevent further contact with the juvenile justice system.

REFERRAL PROCESS

When the Youth and Law class began in September 1976, referrals were only accepted from probation intake. Each referral included the minor's name, his date of birth, crime committed and his parent's names and addresses. After receiving and logging the referrals, they were then given to clerical staff who, in turn, sent out letters informing the minor and his parents of the date and time of the class. The class was presented once a week, and limited to approximately 20 minors and at least one parent for each child. Other family members were also encouraged to attend. The day following the class, the referral forms were returned to the intake officer with a notation as to whether the referred minor completed the class or failed to appear. Each minor was given two opportunities to appear before being returned to the intake probation officer for further action.

Subsequently, the class was made available to the Fresno Police Department Juvenile Division. Referrals were made on the same basis as with probation intake, and, because of the large number of police department referrals, a second class was soon initiated. Presently, one afternoon and one evening class are offered each week.

PROGRAM CONTENT

The Youth and Law class was created and developed not only to give the referred minor and his parents factual information about the law but also to dispel existing myths and half-truths about the juvenile justice system. Additionally, the class was intended to clarify parental liability and responsibility.

Opening with a brief introduction and history of the juvenile justice system, the class explores various offenses commonly bringing juveniles to the attention of the system. The elements of several crimes are covered along with a discussion of accomplice liability and the California felony murder rule. Additionally, the possibility of 16 and 17 year old minors being prosecuted in adult court is discussed. Differences between the adult and juvenile systems are contrasted with emphasis placed particularly on the Gault Decision and other U.S. Supreme Court rulings. Sections of the Welfare and Institutions Code of California dealing with dependent/neglected children, status and criminal offenders are explained as are the procedures by which different agencies process these referrals. Juvenile arrest procedures and the options of law enforcement are emphasized. Local institutions (juvenile hall and C. K. Wakefield School), and the programs offered by the California Youth Authority, are described.

Each class is 3 hours long and includes 2 breaks. After the first break, class participants listen to a taped conversation with a minor residing in juvenile hall. This recording is followed by a slide presentation which depicts a minor being arrested by local police and processed through Fresno's juvenile justice system. The living units and programs of the juvenile hall and C. K. Wakefield School and the California Youth Authority are also displayed and explained in this slide presentation.

Following the second break, the sealing and destruction of a minor's record, parental liability and responsibility are discussed. The class concludes with a 12 question true and false quiz to which parents and minors are requested to sign their names for roll taking purposes. The quizzes are corrected orally and the class participants are then invited to make written comments on their papers before turning them in to the instructor. Once the quiz has been completed, the instructor issues a "Certificate of Completion" to the minor.

FINDINGS

The Youth and Law class completed its first year of operation on September 22, 1977. During this first year, 84 classes were conducted and a total of 1,454 minors were referred. Of that total, 1,318 successfully completed the class and the remaining 126 referrals were returned to the probation intake officer for failing to appear on two scheduled occasions. Attendance for the year, including minors, parents, other family members and friends, totaled 3,226 people.

An analysis of those minors referred during the first year disclosed the ethnic background of minors participating to be comparable with the overall ethnic breakdown of Fresno county. The largest percentage of referrals were between 13 and 16 years of age. More males than females were re-

ferred. The highest percentage of offenses for which minors were referred was petty theft, possession of marijuana and burglary.

In addition to providing probation intake officers with a new alternative disposition for first offenders, the Youth and Law class was designed to decrease recidivism. The effectiveness of the class was evaluated by tracking 515 minors who had attended the class between September 22, 1976 and March 22, 1977.

The minors under study were tracked through the use of their Central Juvenile Index cards (CJI) kept in Fresno Juvenile Hall. These cards reflect the dates and nature of all law enforcement contacts as well as the intake disposition. Of the 515 minors attending the class during the first 6 months, 443 CJI cards were located. The remaining cards, by and large, had been destroyed when these persons attained their majority. Of the 443 minors tracked by CJI cards, only 72 (16%) were arrested within a period of 6 months after completing the Youth and Law class.

Although the Youth and Law class was especially designed for first time offenders, the study revealed that a substantial number of young people with prior arrest histories had also been referred. It was encouraging to see that many of these persons had also been arrest-free for a period of 6 months following their completion of the class.

The effectiveness of the Youth and Law class was measured by comparing the class group to a similar group of first offenders who had not had the benefit of this alternative disposition. A random selection from probation records produced a group of first offenders who had appeared in the probation department between September 18, 1975 through January 31, 1976 and against whom no petition had been filed. From this selection, 379 CJI cards were found at juvenile hall. Tracking was accomplished in the same manner as before. Of the 379 first offenders forming the control group, 108 (29%) recidivated within 6 months of their initial arrest.

Table 1

	<i>Number of Minors</i>	<i>Recidivism in 6 Months</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Youth & Law Group	443.....	72	16
Control Group	379.....	108	29

As well as comparing the recidivism rate of both groups, attention was also focused on the effect of the Youth and Law class on the recidivism offense, i.e., no change, improved or escalated. If a minor was initially referred on an out-of-control offense and subsequently re-arrested for the same offense he was classified as a "no change". A minor initially arrested for a felony and later re-arrested for a misdemeanor was classified as "improved". The term "escalated" was applied to those minors arrested for the first time for a status offense or the commission of a misdemeanor and subsequently re-arrested for a felony. The study showed a higher percentage of Youth and Law participants undergoing "no change" when arrested the second time and a smaller percentage escalating than the control group.

Table II

	<i>Number of Minors</i>	<i>No Change</i>	<i>Improved</i>	<i>Escalated</i>
Youth & Law Group	72	48 (67%)	10 (15%)	14 (19%)
Control Group	108	61 (57%)	18 (17%)	29 (23%)

Above and beyond the positive results indicated by the comparative study, the Youth and Law class has been personally well received by the parents of minors attending as revealed by their written comments:

"Your Youth and Law class is well worth 3 hours".

"Hopefully one of these days we can have this class in junior high".

"The session was both informative and interesting, and despite the circumstances, I appreciate the opportunity to attend".

"As both a taxpayer and a mother, I was pleased to see the efforts, time and money put to such a positive endeavor and hope it will, in some way, counteract all the negatives".

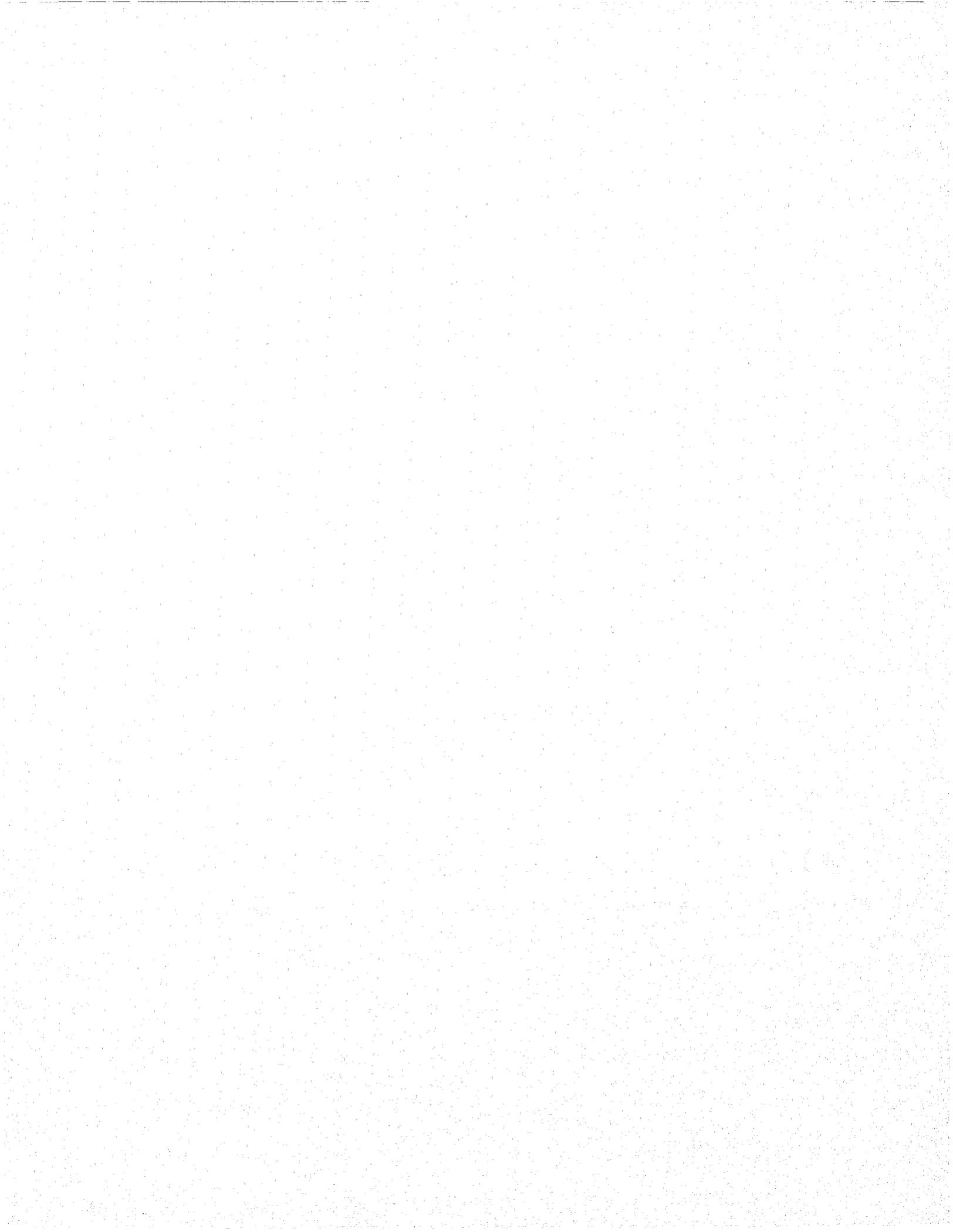
"I believe it's good and I believe the law should be enforced fully".

"Kids need to be made to think before acting and it is good for them to see what can happen. This would be good education in all schools before even the first offense".

CONCLUSION

Since the development of the Youth and Law program and class, it has evolved into a fine training tool for new probation officers, police officers, juvenile hall counselors, probation volunteers and members of the Delinquency Prevention and Juvenile Justice Commissions. It has also expanded into several programs including an Adult and Law Program offered to high school seniors and adult first offenders. In addition, it has achieved statewide recognition as evidenced by invitations for presentation at numerous county probation departments and various statewide professional conferences and meetings.

As in many types of delinquency prevention programs, it is difficult to objectively evaluate the results; however, based on our analysis of the statistics derived from the Youth and Law class, we can reasonably conclude that the whole Youth and Law program and class has the effect of reducing crime and delinquency through education.



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