



## Community-based and family-focused alternatives to incarceration: A quasi-experimental evaluation of interventions for delinquent youth



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Prior research documented the efficacy of family-centered interventions at reducing juvenile delinquency. Parenting with Love and Limits® (PLL), a community-based and family-focused approach to treating juvenile offenders was piloted in Florida as part of the Florida Redirection Project enacted by the state legislature to divert youth from residential facilities to community-based services.

**Methods:** Using propensity score matching, all youth who completed the PLL program in Florida during the three-year period from fiscal years 2007–08 through 2009–10 (n = 92), were matched to similar risk youth who completed residential services during the same time period (n = 92) and compared to examine 12-month, post-intervention recidivism outcomes.

**Results:** Results revealed that youth completing PLL had, on average, lower rates of recidivism. The community-based intervention achieved lower rates of reconviction, felony conviction, and subsequent justice system placement (juvenile and adult) one year following the completion of services.

**Findings:** These findings suggest that community-based programs that integrate family-focused individual and group therapy may be an effective alternative to more restrictive, institutional placements for delinquent youth.

The use of community-based interventions has grown in the last decade as more states seek alternatives to costly residential commitment for juvenile offenders (Butler, Baruch, Hickey, & Fonagy, 2011; Gordon, Graves, & Arbuthnot, 1995; Henggeler, Melton, & Smith, 1992; Sexton & Turner, 2010; Winokur Early, Hand, Blankenship, & Chapman, 2012). These interventions vary in design and focus, and produced mixed results in reducing youths' subsequent offending. Identifying effective alternatives to residential placement, as well as the programming components associated with positive outcomes, are of critical importance to the field and juvenile justice systems facing growing budgetary constraints nationwide.

The convergence of economic restrictions and the growing body of empirical literature on effective treatment interventions for delinquent youth intensified demands for treatment program accountability and the implementation of evidence-based practices (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 1999). Embedded in this approach, juvenile justice systems began to match offender risks and needs to treatment interventions proven to reduce the likelihood of re-offending, and to address the individual needs of youth and their families (Andrews et al., 1990; Gendreau, 1996). Several states are now shifting from a reliance on

costly juvenile residential commitment to less expensive, community-based programming, particularly for those youth charged with non-violent crimes and who pose a diminished threat to public safety. In a more recent meta-analysis of 545 treatment programs, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Drake, Aos, & Miller, 2009) found a number of effective community-based treatment programs that were reasonably priced and demonstrated positive returns. Included among these were Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, Functional Family Therapy, Adolescent Diversion Project, Multisystemic Therapy, and Family Integrated Transitions (Drake et al., 2009).

Building on this growing body of evidence-based practices, in 2004, the Florida Legislature implemented the Redirection Project creating a community-based platform for addressing the needs of delinquent youth. The project targeted non-violent offenders who would otherwise be subject to residential placement – 24/7, staff, and hardware secure facilities, focused almost exclusively on public safety, not rehabilitation. The Florida Legislature sought cost-effective and evidence-based community programming to serve this population of youth. Redirection services, initially implemented in 2004, diverted delinquent youth from confinement placement to probation. As part of their probation

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disposition under the Redirection program, these youth receive one of two treatment options initially: Multisystemic Therapy® (MST) or Functional Family Therapy (FFT). The Parenting with Love and Limits® (PLL) model was introduced as an additional alternative after the first year of the project. Placement in one of the three treatment options was based on funding, need and evidence of improvement. In 2007, there were roughly 40,000 youth on probation, 573 total in the Redirection project, and < 100 assigned to PLL (FDJJ, 2008). A multitude of studies examined the effectiveness of MST and FFT services in recent years. Less is known about the impact of the PLL community-based and family-centered system of care for delinquent youth and their families, and it is the latter program that is the focus of this study.

Evidence supports the use of family based therapy – both generic counseling and structured programming (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). Lipsey and colleagues reported positive results in a meta-analysis of family programs, although not all had a significant effect on recidivism or other quality of life measures (2010). Model programs showed varying degrees of positive growth, “some no-name programs produced effects even larger than those found for the model programs” (Lipsey et al., 2010, p. 26). Given the mixture of research pertaining to family based interventions, more empirical inquiry is necessary to determine the specific characteristics that distinguish those services that work from those that do not, as well as those that are effective as juvenile reentry interventions.

We evaluated the impact of PLL services on recidivism in the juvenile and adult systems, and compared the outcomes to those of youth completing standard juvenile commitment sanctions over the same time period. Specifically, we examined youth diverted from residential placement as part of the Florida Redirection Project to PLL during the three-year period from July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2010 (n = 92). These youth were matched to a residential sample completing services during this three-year period (n = 92). The overarching questions guiding the research were first does the PLL alternative to residential commitment achieve lower rates of re-conviction than standard residential services? Second, does PLL result in lower rates of re-commitment, adult probation, or adult incarceration compared to standard juvenile residential commitment? And finally, is PLL a cost-effective alternative to more restrictive residential programs?

## 1. Prior research

Effective community-based family intervention programs have several salient features in common. First, they are firmly based on a therapeutic, theoretical footing such as Family Systems Theory, Social Systems Theory, or Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Robinson, 2003 and Scattergood, Dash, Epstein, & Adler, 1998). The underlying factors present in a child's history and environment, including familial relations, unresolved trauma and unmet basic needs are all elements of the underlying ecology impacting the child's emotional and behavioral well-being. Interventions that address family functioning within this ecological context demonstrate positive outcomes among anti-social and delinquent youth (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; McCord, 1980, 1991).

Programs that focus on family functioning tend to be strength-based with the goal of empowering parents to affect changes in their own lives. They focus upon improving parent-child communication and relationships, and especially upon parental functions that include monitoring, limit setting, and discipline (Conger & Simons, 1997 and Loeber & Farrington, 1998). These intermediate goals aim toward mitigating family risk factors and reducing anti-social behaviors resulting in arrest, detention, and court involvement. The strength-based approach implies that interventions take place not only with the individual and family, but services also focus upon other pro-social aspects of the child's life to leverage these protective assets. Such interventions target areas for treatment within the social ecology of the

individual and may include: normative and pro-social behavior reinforcement, close supervision, promotion of positive peer associations, clear and consistent limit-setting with follow-through on rule violations, instruction on developing positive work habits and academic skills, emphasis on supporting family members, and skill instruction for reducing familial conflict (Fisher & Chamberlain, 2000). Each of these functions can impact the individual and the family, as well as aspects of the youth's social environment including peer relations, school, employment, and the court system.

In the past decade, research focused on the implications of securing juvenile delinquents within correctional settings. Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents face a great deal of victimization from both their peers and correctional staff while behind bars. Beck and Rantala (2016) report in a six-year period there were 1686 substantiated claims of sexual violence within juvenile correctional facilities across the United States. Nearly 10% of these claims were from staff-on-youth sexual victimization (Beck & Rantala, 2016). Similarly, in interviews conducted with a sample of previously incarcerated youth (N = 62), Dierkhising, Lane, and Natsuaki (2014) found 77% experienced direct abuse during incarceration and nearly all (95%) witnessed at least one incident of abuse while detained. In addition the authors also found that such exposure to abuse impacted post release functioning. Dierkhising et al. (2014) found that experiencing or witnessing abuse while incarcerated was associated with increased likelihood of post-traumatic stress reactions, depressive symptoms, and recidivism upon release. Peer abuse was the most commonly cited form of abuse in the Dierkhising et al. (2014) study. Theoretically, this may be related to a cycle of violence approach within the juvenile justice system, outlined by DeLisi et al. (2009) who found that incarcerated juveniles who experienced traumatic events (e.g. being in serious danger, witnessing death or injury, sexual victimization) were more prone to sexual misconduct, suicidal ideations or behavior, and institutional infractions while confined. Such negative outcomes, coupled with the cost of incarceration, provide a basis for assessing community corrections and therapeutic alternatives in responding to juvenile offenders.

According to empirical reviews of juvenile offender treatment programs, community-based options are more effective at reducing recidivism than standard incarcerative interventions (DeLisi et al., 2009; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). In a 1998 study, Lipsey and Wilson found that community-based programming had a slightly larger effect size, although not significantly so. However, in a study the following year Lipsey (1999) found that juvenile probation, parole, and community-based services had greater effect sizes than those found in institutional programs, in general. Further, the positive effects of targeted correctional treatments were larger in community-based programs than in residential programs (0.35 in the community versus 0.20 for residential), while the negative effects of ineffective programming were smaller in community settings (– 0.06 in the community versus – 0.15 in residential) (Andrews et al., 1990). Andrews and Bonta (2006) reached similar conclusions, and found that the mean effect sizes were larger in appropriate community-based programming than in appropriate institutional programming (0.35 versus 0.17, respectively).

In addition to positive outcomes, community-based approaches permit a family-focused approach to treatment that targets risk factors within the home, peer associations, and school settings. This is consistent with the Gluecks' seminal work in the 1950's demonstrating that family factors are linked to antisocial behavior among youth (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). Since that time, Patterson and his colleagues (1992) utilized an ecological systems framework to develop a social interactional, coercive family process model which mapped the developmental progression of antisocial boys into subsequent delinquency and crime, with a focus on the influence of poor parent family management skills (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Similarly, longitudinal research from Patterson, Forgatch, Yoerger, and Stoolmiller (1998) found that family relationships were critical in the growth of antisocial behavior in males. Meta-analytic reviews of delinquency

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