



## 'Nothing works' in secure residential youth care?



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### ABSTRACT

A debate about the effectiveness of secure residential youth care is currently going on. While some continue to support secure residential youth care, others conclude that 'nothing works' in secure residential youth care, and argue that non-residential treatment is superior to secure residential treatment. This article reviews recent research on this topic. The conclusion is that evidence for the effectiveness of non-residential treatment for youth with severe behavioural problems and/or criminal behaviour is sparse if considered as an alternative for secure residential youth care. Secure residential treatment shows a modest, but positive effect. We need to overhaul the myth that 'nothing works' in secure residential youth care, and focus on how to optimise the effects of secure residential youth care.

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### 1. Introduction

A debate is being conducted about the effectiveness of secure residential youth care (Marshall & Burton, 2010; Van der Helm, Wissink, Stams, & De Jong, 2012), although firm scientific evidence is hard to obtain because of ethical problems which preclude the use of randomised control trials (De Swart et al., 2012). While some researchers show that secure residential youth care can work (De Swart et al., 2012; Koehler, Losel, Akoensi, & Humphreys, 2013; Schubert, Mulvey, Loughran, & Loyosa, 2012), other researchers claim that 'nothing works' in secure residential youth care (e.g. Davidson-Arad & Golan, 2007; Peterson-Badali & Koegl, 2002; Wortley, 2002) or at least that non-residential treatment is superior to residential treatment (e.g., French & Cameron, 2002; Kendrick, Steckley, & McPheat, 2011). Drawing on Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958), Zimbardo (2007) concludes in his book 'the Lucifer effect' that residential care cannot be effective since power inequalities cause unprofessional behaviour of detention staff. However, the results of his classic study are currently being questioned (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Hermanns (2010, 2012) and also Hanrath (2009, chap. 11, 2013) take Zimbardo's argument further and consider detention not to be compatible with treatment, and argue that incarcerating adolescents increases recidivism. They contend that positive results can only be achieved by a change of policy, e.g., replacing residential care with non-residential alternatives, in particular 'wraparound care'.

Wraparound care is based on using the available child and family strengths in a planning process that results in a unique set of community services and natural supports (Grundle, 2002). However, two recent reviews indicate that there is still not enough empirical support for the effectiveness of wraparound care due to serious methodological limitations

of the intervention studies examining the effects of wraparound care (Suter & Bruns, 2009; Walter & Petr, 2011). On the other hand, although one cannot conclude that wraparound care is a viable alternative for residential care, there is some preliminary empirical evidence to suggest that multidimensional treatment foster care (MTFC) could be an alternative for incarceration of juvenile delinquents (e.g., Chamberlain, Leve, & DeGarmo, 2007; Eddy, Whaley, & Chamberlain, 2004). Moreover, Andrews and Bonta (2010) showed that non-residential treatment based on the 'what works principles' of judicial interventions is far more effective than residential treatment of juvenile delinquents based on these principles.

It is time to evaluate the weight of evidence. What are the arguments of those who believe that (secure) residential youth care is ineffective and 'nothing can work'? On the other hand, which evidence supports the effectiveness of secure residential youth care? We need to bear in mind that secure residential youth care not only serves treatment goals, but also serves to protect society (Bullock, Little, & Millham, 1998; Hagell & Jeyarajah-Dent, 2006). To weigh the evidence for the effectiveness of secure residential youth care, we searched for evidence of recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews, which we will present in this review. This article focuses on weaknesses and strengths of secure residential youth care.

### 2. Negative consequences of incarceration: coercion and repression

Ample literature exists on negative consequences of incarceration. Sykes (1970), called this 'the pains of imprisonment', more recently researchers refer to 'derivational characteristics' (Gover, MacKenzie, & Armstrong, 2000). Probably the most derivational characteristic of being locked up concerns coercion that inevitably accompanies secure care (Hermanns, 2012). In a review, Pritikin, (2009) shows that coercion most likely increases anti-social behaviour and recidivism. A recent

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meta-analysis indicates that the effectiveness of interventions deteriorates as the amount of coercion increases (Parhar, Wormith, Derksen, & Beauregard, 2008). Interventions with punishment as the main objective often have counterproductive effects: a significant increase of delinquency is observed instead of a decline in anti-social behaviour (Lipsey, 2009). In addition, neurobiological research on punishment substantiates these negative research outcomes (e.g., Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessel, 1991).

However, the studies by Pritikin (2009) and Parhar et al. (2008) did not discriminate between coercion and repression. Coercion in a secure residential context may be part of the structure and control that are necessary to set boundaries and prevent chaos and anarchy. Coercion, however, can easily transform into repression due to (extreme) power imbalance (Lammers & Stapel, 2011; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2011; Zimbardo, 2007). Repression refers to extreme punitive power of group workers, lack of safety, lack of privacy, injustice, unfair treatment, and incremental rules (e.g., group punishment).

Research, however, shows that within residential care, staff members in some cases are able to establish an open group climate, that is, coercion without repression (Van der Helm, Boekee, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2011). Group climate refers to a shared perception of the way one ought to think, feel and behave in an environment or situation (after Schein, 1993; Van der Helm, Klapwijk, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2009; Van der Helm et al., 2012). In an open group climate equality and mutual respect, together with autonomy and responsibility are important goals. Moreover, responsivity from group workers can constitute a counterbalance for dehumanisation and subsequent repression (Van der Helm, 2011). An open climate and responsivity can lead to mutual trust and meaningful interpersonal contact and feelings of safety (Van der Helm et al., 2009). This open group climate results in higher internal locus of control and greater treatment motivation, which are two key factors playing a role in treatment effectiveness. An open group climate facilitates one of the most important educational and rehabilitative (sentencing) aims of secure residential care, namely, successful reintegration into society through restoring the bond with society that was damaged by anti-social behaviour (Van der Helm et al., 2011, 2009).

### 3. Deviancy training

A second argument against residential care is deviancy training. Treating deviant youth together can worsen their problems, because they can reinforce one another's aggressive and deviant behaviours by means of deviancy training (e.g., Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2001). Evidence for this claim, however, is mixed and recent studies, including a meta-analysis, found little support for contagious effects of aggression or deviant behaviour in residential group settings (Handwerk, Field, & Friman, 2000; Mager, Milich, Harris, & Howard, 2005; Rhule, 2005; Weiss et al., 2005). Moreover, some studies indicate that youth can also have a positive influence on each other (e.g., Lee, Chmelka, & Thompson, 2010). Lee and colleagues found that adolescents showing less aggression and delinquency were often from the same group. Positive peer relationships can serve as an important protective factor for youth placed in residential care (Devine, 2004).

Handwerk et al. (2000) found that education and family style residential care that is based on behavioural learning principles can buffer against potential detrimental effects. Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) found that potential damaging effects can be mitigated, even for high-risk populations, when residential centres are small, staff agrees on aims and methods, and managers feel in control of admissions. These findings reflect those of Brown, Bullock, Hobson, and Little (1998), who emphasise beneficial effects for youth placed in settings where there is congruence between structure and culture. Groeneweg, der Helm, and Stams (2011) found that if group workers gave youth positive feedback this was associated with a decline in criminal cognitions, which indicates that the negative effects of residential care may be overcome. These findings again highlight the importance of an open living group climate.

Hermanns (2012), in his plea against residential care, however, states that the possible positive effects gained within the confinement of the institution are not generalisable outside youth prison; a positive group climate has no effect on behavioural problems and recidivism of juvenile offenders. Nevertheless, recent research demonstrates the opposite. Schubert et al. (2012) show that youths' positive perceptions of the institutional environment are related to a significant decline in recidivism and externalising problems when these youths are released over and above individual factors and facility characteristics. Koehler et al. (2013) show careful residential interventions to be modestly effective (see further).

### 4. Interventions within residential care

Hermanns (2012) further states that there are no available 'evidence based' residential interventions, and that we therefore need to focus on the promising methods outside the walls of residential institutions. However, it seems that only few of these 'promising' non-residential methods can really be regarded as 'evidence based', and have proven to be more effective than residential interventions (De Swart et al., 2012). Moreover, the fact that there are few known 'evidence based' interventions during detention does not automatically mean that 'nothing works'. It should be kept in mind that effectiveness of residential care is negatively affected by the fact that youth within residential care often have a long history of treatment and care that was not effective in reducing their problems (Harder, 2011; Harder, Knorth, & Zandberg, 2006).

Several studies have shown that youth may indeed profit from residential care (De Swart, 2011; Harder, 2011; Nijhof, 2011; Van Dam, Nijhof, Scholte, & Veerman, 2010; Van der Helm, 2011). Recent reviews and meta-analyses show small but positive effects of residential treatment (De Swart et al., 2012; Garrido & Morales, 2007; Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009; Knorth, Harder, Zandberg, & Kendrick, 2008; Lipsey, 2009; Loughran et al., 2009). The most recent review by Koehler shows imprisonment to have a negative effect on juvenile recidivism, but when treatment is the main goal of detention results become positive (odds 1.34, see also Lipsey, 2009). When cognitive behavioural therapy was used odds rose to 1.73, and when treatment was delivered according to the Risks, Needs and Responsivity principles from Andrews and Bonta (2010), results were even more positive (odds 1.90, a reduction of 16% recidivism according to Koehler et al., 2013). These results are promising and so before we can truly conclude that 'nothing works', future research should first investigate the issue of effective residential interventions (Marshall & Burton, 2010).

Future studies should also focus on the effectiveness of aftercare. A recent meta-analysis (James, Stams, Asscher, Van der Laan, & De Roo, 2013) does show promising results for the effectiveness of aftercare. The results indicate that well-implemented individual aftercare can contribute to the effectiveness of residential care and can reduce recidivism.

### 5. Reformation and detention

Finally, in his presentation at the conference of the Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles, Hermanns (2012) concluded that detention and treatment are incompatible, that humans simply cannot be reformed by detention. Remarkably, the next lecture of the conference proved the exact opposite. In the next speech, Ploeg (2012) focused on the Norwegian prison-island Bastøy and provided substantial evidence that detention and treatment may very well go together. Ploeg described that the inmates face important responsibilities and challenges themselves, and that they are trained and helped to take responsibility for their own actions, life and future. The guards serve as good and motivational role models, and operate by clear rules and standards. Bastøy is a success story; there has been no incident of aggression or violence in the past four years, only one of the 3285 persons on leave came back too late during the probation period, and everyone released in

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