



Intervention in juvenile delinquency: Danger of iatrogenic effects?

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ABSTRACT

The present article reviews the literature on juvenile delinquency intervention programs with a special focus on the iatrogenic effects of such programs. Indeed, the greater the number of adolescents with the same type of problems who are grouped in the same place, the higher the likelihood that their undesirable behavioural patterns will be reinforced. We also provide evidence for a number of factors that can prevent this deviant peer contagion effect and therefore optimise the prevention or treatment measures carried out in consequence of juvenile court decisions. The most beneficial measures in juvenile delinquency matters appear to be the ones that are centred on the youths' pre-trial environments and which do not require placement in detention facilities.

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1. Intervention in juvenile delinquency: danger of iatrogenic effects?

Juvenile delinquents tend to be a population that strongly resists change (Hollin, 1992), which makes their rehabilitation difficult. Without intervention, the recidivism rate for juvenile offenders is estimated to be in the 60%–80% range (Jenson & Howard, 1998). Presently, the treatment of delinquent adolescents is generally performed in group settings (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; Handwerk, Field, & Friman, 2000). Public authorities implicitly encourage this practice by the gathering together of convicted young offenders in special schools and detention facilities designed for the protection of juveniles (de Terwangne, 2006). The basic assumption underlying this type of intervention is the belief that these youths lack the ability to obtain what they desire in an appropriate

manner, which leads them to commit delinquent acts. This method has had considerable success in North America (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, in press; Hawkins, Jenson, Catalano, & Wells, 1991; Le Blanc, Dionne, Proulx, Grégoire, & Trudeau Le Blanc, 1998; Lipsey, Wilson, & Cothorn, 2000; Losèl, 1993) and is becoming progressively more common in Europe (Born & Chevalier, 1996; Mathys, Hélin, & Born, 2008; Nas, Brugman, & Koops, 2005).

This success notwithstanding, group therapeutic procedures have not been immune from criticism. Certain iatrogenic effects have been observed in groups of adolescent delinquents in collective intervention programs, such as an increase in delinquent behavioural patterns and or a higher consumption of cigarettes or psychotropic substances (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Dodge et al., 2006; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Palinkas, Atkins, Miller, & Ferreira, 1996; Poulin, Dishion, & Burraston, 2001). This phenomenon is defined as "deviant peer contagion" in specialist literature (Bayer, Pintoff, & Pozen, 2004). Bayer et al. (2004) conclude that the exposure to peers with a similar criminal history

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seems likely to increase the propensity to reoffend, especially in cases of burglary, petty larceny, misdemeanour drug offences and felony sex offences. Thus, this type of intervention, by promoting contact between deviant peers, may inhibit or annul the positive effects that may have been achieved.

Affiliation with deviant peers appears to be one of the strongest correlates of juvenile delinquency (Elliot & Menard, 1996; Dodge et al., 2006; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997). This relationship may be driven by the strong social reinforcement derived from the approval of deviant behaviour by like-minded associates (Born, 2005). These statements are echoed in theories which posit a “drift into deviance,” which often results from an affiliation with deviant peers (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dishion, Spracklen, et al., 1996). Another variant of this principle is the “delinquency spiral” (Born, 2005), according to which individuals are more likely to associate with groups whose norms are similar to their own, thus favouring the reciprocal reinforcement of deviant behaviour.

The underlying basis of these theories is that adolescents who have had socialisation difficulties are more likely to perform and to encourage each other in antisocial behaviour as they lose interest in pro-social discussions or, more simply, as their antisocial actions or words receive positive reinforcement (Weiss, Caron, Ball, Tapp, Johnson, & Weisz, 2005). Consistent with this view is the finding by Lipsey et al. (2000) that the most efficient intervention methods for the reduction of delinquent behaviour were the ones that afforded little opportunity for deviant peers to interact with one another. Moreover, the aggregation of deviant peers decreases the positive influence of socially adjusted peers (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Dodge et al., 2006; Dishion, Spracklen et al., 1996).

2. Efficiency of intervention programs for delinquent minors

Several meta-analyses have been performed in this field (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 1992; Lipsey, 2006; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998; MacKenzie, 2002) although the assessment of juvenile delinquency intervention measures remains uncommon and often lacks exactitude because the design is not meticulous with differences between the treatment and control groups or nonexperimental design (Greenwood, 2006). In a review of the literature, Dodge et al. (2006) suggest that individual intervention programs are more efficient than those which join delinquent adolescents. Andrews et al. (1990) propose the implementation of intervention programs adapted to the specific individual's needs. Along the same lines, Weiss et al. (2005) highlight the fact that less positive results are achieved by collective intervention programs than by individual intervention measures, a trend which applies to all types of interventions, not only programs which focus on behavioural problems.

As far as collective intervention measures are concerned, according to the meta-analysis performed by Lipsey and Wilson (1998), programs carried out at the heart of the communities—in the youths' environment—prove far more beneficial than intervention measures that involve placement in detention facilities. In particular, Greenwood (2006) identifies two mechanisms which hinder an adolescent's progress in a placement program: first, the development of the youth's negative self-image; and second, the environment in which the youth is placed and develops skills does not reflect the outside world. Furthermore, there is a higher risk of deviant peer contagion (Bayer et al., 2004; Dishion et al., 1999; Dodge et al., 2006) in placement programs than in community-based intervention measures.

On the other hand, Weiss et al. (2005) affirm that youths are more likely to develop deviant behaviour in their own social environment than in the context of a communal intervention program. These authors contend that juvenile delinquents spend little time in treatment groups relative to the amount of time spent engaged in unstructured activities with their peers, (Larson, 2001). Thus, the process of “drifting towards deviance” is not considered to be intrinsic to adolescent delinquent intervention measures, but rather it stems from the youths' unstructured social interactions.

In order to clarify these theories, this brief review of the literature concerning the positive aspects of intervention programs for delinquent adolescents has been established, comparing placement programs with community-based measures. Lipsey and Wilson (1998) demonstrate that vocational training and wilderness challenge activities—both community-based intervention measures—are non-productive for delinquent adolescents. According to Lundman (2001), such community interventions might not be able to modify the causes and risk factors underlying delinquency. On the other hand, long-term intervention programs, the involvement of intervening social factors and the organisation of interpersonal skills training activities, individual counselling, and behavioural programs seem to produce positive results. Indeed, interventions only based on negative reinforcement strategies, such as boot camps, seem to be ineffective (Feldman, 1992; McCord, 2003; Silverman & Creechan, 1995; Wilson, MacKenzie & Ngo Mitchell, 2005). However, MacKenzie (2002) identifies boot camps as a system which can lead to satisfying results with adolescents who are considered mildly delinquent or at an early stage of a delinquency, rather than putting these youths on a residential placement program. Dishion et al. (1999) found that a stay in a summer camp for youths at risk of becoming delinquents could be a significant predictor of future delinquency even if the boys participating in this experiment did not all demonstrate negative behavioural consequences in the follow-ups. More generally, MacKenzie (2002) suggests that controlling and supervising youths in their social environment is not sufficient if these actions are not combined with an intervention program carried out by an appropriate service.

Regarding placement intervention measures, Lipsey and Wilson (1998) advocate long-term treatment programs that are well integrated in institutional practices and administered by mental-health professionals. Activities such as interpersonal skills training and the teaching family home model are beneficial. On the other hand, wilderness challenge and employment-related activities seem to be rather inefficient and more subject to deviant peer contagion. In general, Andrews et al. (1990) endorse intervention measures which focus on youths who present a high risk of delinquent behaviour, or who persist in such behavioural patterns, by specifically aiming at the risk factors associated with delinquency, such as drug abuse or the association with deviant peers. These factors can be prone to change.

Regardless of the type of intervention measure, long-term juvenile delinquency treatment programs that include family intervention and multisystemic and cognitive-behavioural therapies, and which concentrate on factors which reinforce delinquency (e.g. drugs, alcohol, deviant peers, etc.) show greater success as far as a more stable adaptation of the adolescents and a lower recidivism rate is concerned (Tarolla, Wagner, Rabinowitz, & Tubman, 2002).

3. Moderating and mediating factors in the context of deviant peer influence

The effect of peer contagion, which manifests itself in a drift towards deviant behaviour, has been defined as a risk factor (Greenwood, 2006), though the mediating and moderating factors underlying peer contagion are rarely analysed (Dodge et al., 2006). In order to optimise juvenile delinquency intervention measures where the collective is privileged, adolescents are regrouped in the same place, (Curry, 1991; Friman, 2000; Gibbs, Potter, Barriga, & Liau, 1996; Gold & Osgood, 1992; Milin, Coupland, Walker, & Fisher-Bloom, 2000; Pfeiffer & Strzelecki, 1990), it could be useful to consider the factors which may control or diminish the influence of deviant peers.

3.1. The presence of an adult

The first factor to consider is the presence of an experienced leader who is able to mediate the interaction between deviant peers (Dodge et al., 2006). Thus, intervention programs that involve adults (e.g.

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