



What works? A 15-year follow-up study of 85 young people with serious behavioral problems

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents with serious behavioral problems, such as truancy, criminality, drug abuse and vagrancy, provoke a range of reactions. What measures can help these young people onto a more positive track? A child welfare project in a Norwegian county in the early 1980s examined alternative initiatives for boys and girls with the most serious behavioral problems. The adolescents were followed up at the age of 30, by means of interviews, surveys and official data. This article focuses mainly on quantitative analyses. The study shows that three-quarters of the female participants and about half the male participants were living lives traditionally viewed as satisfactory for 30-year-olds, i.e., 'ordinary' lives. The findings indicate that out-of-home initiatives in a family-similar setting (with adults and adolescents living together on an everyday basis) seem to give a chance to re-socialization. Well resourced foster homes and treatment collectives for young drug abusers gave the young people an opportunity to learn step-by-step to have confidence in adults as significant others, to live meaningful and 'ordinary' daily lives and gradually to break with friends with antisocial conduct.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Study objectives and research questions

Adolescence is well documented as being a period of hormonal and emotional turmoil. The transition from childhood to adulthood can be difficult for many, but is more difficult for certain groups, including adolescents with antisocial behavior. Social reaction to adolescent behavior, while different in different countries, usually varies according to the perceived severity of the behavior. A society may be more tolerant of a teenager screaming drunkenly in the middle of the night than of one who breaks into buildings and steals property. Adolescents with severe behavioral problems (e.g., drug abuse, running away, prostitution, theft) provoke a range of social reactions, from concern to anger and from helplessness to the desire to see them imprisoned. In Norway, most politicians during the last 30 years have spoken of imprisonment as a last resort, preferring to seek other solutions for young people under the age of 18. Even so, confidence in the ability of alternative strategies to change the behavior of these adolescents has diminished (see, for example, comments in the Norwegian newspapers *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet*). The government is now formulating plans to build two 'mini prisons' to house the most active and resistant young criminals, although this

policy is not based on scientific knowledge about the best ways to help adolescents with these kinds of problems.

On the other hand, long-term follow-up studies of adolescents with antisocial behavior are both few and of varying quality. Most concern institutional treatment, treatment in various educational or vocational settings or psychotherapeutically oriented, time-limited programs that do not enable growth and development in constructive settings over an extended period. As these studies often simply assess rates of relapse, they lack the perspective necessary to assess improvement or long-term change. Accordingly there is a need for systematic knowledge based on long-term studies that are focused on both quantitative and qualitative analyses of data.

This article presents a 15-year longitudinal study of 85 white ethnic Norwegian adolescents with severe behavioral problems together with some of the results (Helgeland, 2007). The research questions were as follows: how have people with severe adjustment difficulties during their adolescence managed their lives up to the age of 30; were there any critical conditions or courses of events that enabled them to develop positively and adjust; if so, how can this new knowledge create new strategies or interventions to help other troubled adolescents earlier in life?

The study is one of only a few long-term studies in Europe of adolescents with severe behavioral problems (and the only Norwegian study extending over 15 years). Its findings are therefore important compared with the findings of other more short-term studies.

Before presenting the results, I will explore the background to the study to place it in context.

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1.2. Background – A child welfare program as an alternative to imprisonment

Between 1981 and 1984, a state-initiated child welfare program was organized to investigate alternatives to imprisonment for adolescents with antisocial behavior. The program was an outcome of the Norwegian government's desire to increase the minimum age for imprisonment from 14 to 15. It was intended, if possible, to provide information about the use of alternative strategies within the child welfare system to deal with 14-year-old criminals. The program was run in Buskerud county, which was selected as typical of the 19 counties in Norway. The Buskerud Project provided three types of services:

1. *Counseling services for municipalities:* The project counselled staff in the municipalities, suggesting ways to help adolescents for whom help at local level was seen as a realistic and preferable alternative. Fifteen of the adolescents, all evaluated as having the least extensive problems, received this type of help.
2. *Reinforced local initiatives:* The project either provided parents with supervision, to develop further the skills they needed for dealing with their troubled teenagers, and/or developed alternative school programs or job training. These adolescents lived at home with their parents.
3. *New start initiatives:* For cases where neither of the above alternatives was considered appropriate, because of a prolonged need for 24-hour care, the project initiated three housing options. The goal was to provide the adolescents with a new start in life.

The first option of new start initiatives consisted of a specialized type of foster home, a specially funded foster home, or a so-called reinforced foster home. Here one of the foster parents received full-time pay for providing full-time foster care (as opposed to the usual fostering arrangement whereby foster parents merely receive supplementary payments to cover food, clothing etc.). The foster parents also received regular guidance and support from the child welfare services. The second option was collective housing for adolescent drug abusers, a so-called treatment collective. In this case a home was provided (which might consist of a farm, a large house or many small houses) in which supervisory adults lived with the adolescents as one large family, monitoring their behavior and providing care *in loco parentis*. The third option took the form of formal institutional residences, including boarding schools and institutions for adolescent psychiatric patients. Here the adults worked eight-hour shifts (unlike the adults in the treatment collectives who lived round-the-clock with the adolescents for two to three weeks before taking a two-week break).

The reinforced local initiatives were not systematically organized after a defined theoretical perspective, like for example the multiple system therapy approach (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998). Each supervisor had his or her own professional theoretical approach.

Most of the adolescents (51) were placed in a new start initiative. Nineteen were supported while living at home with one or two parents, while 15 were helped in their local municipality, which received counseling from the child welfare project.

2. Methods

The data selection for this study consists of the group of 85 adolescents who participated in the child welfare project. Two-thirds were boys and one-third were girls. All were aged 12–16, with the majority aged 14–15, when referred to the project. The group included all the most delinquent juveniles in Buskerud county during the period 1981–85¹. Buskerud county can be seen as an average Norwegian

county. It has 215,000 inhabitants, ranking it ninth in population out of Norway's 19 counties. It has three towns, the largest with approximately 50,000 inhabitants, as well as many villages and rural districts. A distinguishing feature of Buskerud, compared to the other Norwegian counties, is the close proximity (50 km) of its largest town to the Norwegian capital Oslo. Consequently, compared to other provincial Norwegian towns, drugs are more readily available and teenagers can more easily become involved in drug abuse and prostitution.

The design of the study can be viewed as pre-experimental, with three measurements in time: T1 before the intervention (when the adolescents were aged approximately 14–15), and T2 and T3 after the intervention (when they were aged 20 and 30 respectively).

Methods included obtaining and analyzing official crime register data, survey data from social security offices, data from social welfare reports and data obtained from interviews with the adolescents, social workers and foster parents. The final data collection (T3) included life history interviews with 60 members of the group. They were asked about their experiences growing up, their experiences in the various child welfare programs in which they had participated, and how their lives had progressed. The data collected was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This article focuses on the quantitative analyses.² The analyses used were frequency and cross-table analyses, as well as bivariate correlation tables and logistic regression analysis. The ethical dilemmas regarding how to get into contact with the respondents to interview them, are discussed in another article (Helgeland, 2005).

3. Results

3.1. Childhood and family

Almost all studies of adolescents who develop serious behavioral problems point out that most have experienced difficult childhoods (Magnusson, 1988; Robins, 1966; Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Schultz Jørgensen, Ertmann, Egelund, & Hermann, 1993; Werner & Smith, 2001). The studies document family and personal problems, including insufficient care, psychological and physical violence and abuse, drug abuse by parents and siblings, and very difficult social and economic conditions in the home and neighborhood. The children themselves often have problems with concentration, anxiety, social adjustment, and conflicts at school. In addition, these children and young people tend to have very strong attachments to peer groups with behavioral problems (Patterson, Forgatch, Yourger, & Stoolmiller, 1998; Warr, 2002).

This study shows the same. Background data indicates that three-quarters of the 85 adolescents grew up in low-income homes, with parents who had few educational attainments beyond elementary school. Many of the parents were either unemployed or receiving social welfare benefits. Two-thirds grew up with parents who had divorced or separated before their children were referred to the project. Two-thirds grew up with parents who abused alcohol or drugs. Well over two-thirds experienced extensive arguing or violence in their homes. All in all, and to a very significant extent, these were young people who lived in chaotic families and whose everyday lives had almost no structure or predictability.

On the other hand, a quarter of the families appeared 'successful' or 'normal' to the outside world. The adolescents themselves, however, reported feeling lonely at home and complained they were not 'seen' or were ignored by their parents.

More than half the adolescents, more girls than boys, reported that they had been sexually abused.

¹ The Buskerud project was well known throughout all systems in the county working with young people with serious behavioral problems. All juvenile delinquents were required to be referred to the project in the period May 1981–April 1985.

² The qualitative analyses will be presented in another article. In this article some of the qualitative data have been used to give a more extended picture of the young people's life situations.

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