

Spring 1991

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### Recommended Citation

Ira M. Schwartz, Delinquency Prevention: Where's the Beef, 82 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 132 (1991-1992)

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# DELINQUENCY PREVENTION: WHERE'S THE BEEF?

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The rates of juvenile crime and violence are at intolerably high levels and must be brought under control. Elected public officials, juvenile justice and child welfare professionals, child care workers, child advocates, and the public-at-large are anxiously awaiting a significant breakthrough in juvenile delinquency prevention. Unfortunately, no such breakthrough will be forthcoming from the articles in this volume.

The researchers involved in the various studies published here indicate that their findings are preliminary. They are hopeful that further research will be more productive and will generate findings of use to policymakers and practitioners. While these hopes may or may not be realized, these studies reflect a broader and more critical issue: the primitive state of juvenile delinquency prevention knowledge and research in the United States.

Delinquency prevention research must be placed high on the public policy agenda. Also, careful consideration must be given to the kinds of experiments and research strategies which should be implemented in the years ahead. Without this emphasis on effective delinquency prevention research, we will enter the twenty-first century knowing as little about preventing serious juvenile crime as we do today.

## II. REVISITING THE NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE AGENDA

Our limited knowledge about delinquency prevention is not a new issue. Congress recognized the need to promote delinquency prevention when it enacted the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP A) nearly two decades ago.<sup>1</sup> However, as is

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<sup>1</sup> Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, Pub. L. 93-415, 88 Stat. 1109. The Act is codified as 42 U.S.C. § 5601 *et seq.* (1988).

often the case with federal social reform legislation, JJDPa's accomplishments have fallen far short of the hopes and expectations of its creators and supporters.

The JJDPa grew out of hearings on the juvenile justice system conducted by the United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency.<sup>2</sup> The legislation stated that it was the:

declared policy of Congress to provide the necessary resources, leadership, and coordination (1) to develop and implement effective methods of preventing and reducing juvenile delinquency; (2) to develop and conduct effective programs to prevent delinquency, to divert juveniles from the traditional juvenile justice system and to provide critically needed alternatives to institutionalization; (3) to increase the capacity of State and local governments and public and private agencies to conduct effective juvenile justice and delinquency prevention and rehabilitation programs and to provide research, evaluation, and training services in the field of juvenile delinquency prevention.<sup>3</sup>

Congress was deeply concerned about juvenile crime and the need to develop effective methods for rehabilitating juvenile offenders. However, Congress believed that making delinquency prevention activities the priority would better serve the country's interests in the long run. Congress was particularly sensitive to the fact that very little was known about how to prevent delinquency, and that federal leadership and resources were needed in this important but largely unexplored area.

Congress' interest in delinquency prevention was so strong that the topic surfaced as a major issue during a Senate debate over the department in which the federal juvenile justice program should be placed. The Ford Administration and a small group of influential Senate Republicans, whose support for the JJDPa legislation was needed, favored housing the program under the now defunct Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) in the Department of Justice.<sup>4</sup> Senate Democrats, including former Senator Birch Bayh, then Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, favored housing the program in the Executive Office of the President or in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services).

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<sup>2</sup> See S. REP. NO. 93-1011, 93d Cong., 2d Sess., reprinted in 1974 U.S. CODE CONG. & ADMIN. NEWS 5283.

<sup>3</sup> *Ford Administration Stifles Juvenile Justice Program—Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States, Assessment of Implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-415)*: Hearings on S. Res. 72 § 12 Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, 94th Cong., 1st Sess. xii (1975).

<sup>4</sup> I. SCHWARTZ, (IN)JUSTICE FOR JUVENILES: RETHINKING THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD 111 (1989).

Senator Bayh and his colleagues felt the LEAA placed too much emphasis on law enforcement, prosecution and imprisonment whereas the Department of Health, Education and Welfare would emphasize prevention, diversion from the juvenile justice system, and alternatives to incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, Congress passed the JJDP with the provision that the program be housed in the Department of Justice.

The concerns about the juvenile justice program's location within the federal bureaucracy and the impact this location might have on the policy thrusts of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) proved to be well-founded. The OJJDP has never clearly articulated delinquency prevention as a major national priority. Only a fraction of the Office's millions of dollars in discretionary funds earmarked for national demonstration projects and research and training activities have been allocated to delinquency prevention.

In 1981, Dr. Barry Krisberg, President of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), wrote:

Close scrutiny of the notion of preventing delinquency discloses a number of problems complicating its translation into workable public policy and effective programs. Among these are: (1) confusion about the meaning of what is to be prevented, *i.e.*, delinquency; (2) confusion or lack of agreement on the meaning of prevention; and (3) the failure to conduct rigorous evaluations of prevention programs and inconclusive results of those evaluations.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Krisberg just as easily could have written those observations today.

The studies by Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth and Jang; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen and Farrington; and Huizinga, Esbensen, and Weiher are among a precious few that are specifically designed to build our knowledge about delinquency prevention and intervention. Just as important, these studies, and the very small number of others that address delinquency prevention, remind us how far we have strayed from the potentially fruitful juvenile justice agenda envisioned by Congress.

### III. IN SEARCH OF DELINQUENCY PREVENTION

As previously stated, the authors of the studies published in this volume acknowledge that their findings are preliminary and that caution should be exercised in interpreting the results. There are

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 111-12.

<sup>6</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL ON CRIME AND DELINQUENCY, FINAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF DELINQUENCY PREVENTION 521 (1981).

interesting insights to be gleaned from these studies, but they are a long way from making a significant contribution to our knowledge base.

Some of the findings appear simply to reinforce what some thoughtful practitioners and students of delinquency have come to believe intuitively. For example, the studies document the important relationship between delinquent behavior and school, family/caretaker and peer variables. One of the studies suggests, however, that there appear to be multiple paths to delinquency,<sup>7</sup> but cautions that "other variables not included in these preliminary analyses may account for the tendency of some of the children and youth in particular types, such as those in generally pro-social environments with conventional orientations, to engage in delinquency."<sup>8</sup> Another study points out the complexities of the relationship between variables and suggests that this complexity supports "comprehensive, holistic treatment strategies."<sup>9</sup> These findings are interesting but will hardly come as a surprise to practitioners or academics. Juvenile justice professionals and others have been making these claims for decades, albeit based on anecdotal evidence. Professionals in the field may well respond to findings such as these by wondering whether the discovery of what they would consider to be the obvious can justify costly research, particularly during these difficult economic times.

The issue of holistic treatment nevertheless provides important food for thought. Many, if not most, juvenile correctional interventions are narrowly focused. Juvenile probation in most jurisdictions typically consists of monthly or bi-monthly "contacts" between a probation officer carrying a large caseload and the probationer. In cases involving restitution or community service, particularly in lieu of prosecution, intervention is generally limited to supervising or monitoring the youths to ensure that they meet their obligations. These and other interventions may need to be reconceptualized to be effective. Other research indicates that community-based interventions are at least as successful and much less costly than commitment to state youth correctional agencies and institutional placements.<sup>10</sup> The success of such community-based interventions

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<sup>7</sup> Huizinga, Esbensen & Weiher, *Are There Multiple Paths to Delinquency*, 82 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 83, 104 (1991).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth & Jang, *Testing Interactional Theory: An Examination of Reciprocal Causal Relationships Among Family, School, and Delinquency*, 82 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 3, 32 (1991).

<sup>10</sup> B. KRISBERG, *JUVENILE JUSTICE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION* 52 (1990); W. BARTON,

may be increased if more comprehensive services, including education, vocational training, independent living, substance abuse treatment, and family conflict resolution, are provided.<sup>11</sup>

However, holistic treatment requires collaboration among educational, social service and child caring and control institutions. Few models of such collaboration exist. Moreover, some evidence exists that such cooperation may be difficult to bring about. For example, a recent study of state education excellence commissions indicated that they

took a dim view of the need for collaboration. Only two of the 54 responding commissions saw any need for social service or employment/training linkages, only one thought linkages with law enforcement and mental health agencies important, and none saw any role for substance abuse agencies working with the schools.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to highlighting the need for holistic treatment, Thornberry and his colleagues are pursuing a path that may indeed enhance our theoretical understanding of delinquency.<sup>13</sup> They suggest that delinquent behavior is

an active rather than a passive element in the causal system. Because of its reciprocal relationships with the bonding variables, delinquent behavior contributes, in a very real sense, to its own causation. Once exhibited, delinquency causes a deterioration in attachment and commitment, which, in turn, leads to further increases in delinquency.<sup>14</sup>

While the notion that behavior may be the result of complex and reciprocal interactions (*e.g.*, the impact of parents' behavior on children and the impact of children's behavior on parents) may be a new concept in the *delinquency* field, it has been the subject of attention by scholars and researchers in the fields of developmental psychology and child development for some time.<sup>15</sup> All three research

J. BUTTS, C. STROMBERG & R. WEAVER, PROGRAMS FOR SERIOUS AND VIOLENT JUVENILE OFFENDERS 12-13 (1989) [hereinafter W. BARTON, PROGRAMS].

<sup>11</sup> W. BARTON, PROGRAMS, *supra* note 10, at 11.

<sup>12</sup> R. SMITH & C. LINCOLN, AMERICA'S SHAME, AMERICA'S HOPE: TWELVE MILLION YOUTH AT RISK 38 (1988).

<sup>13</sup> Thornberry, *supra* note 9, at 9-15.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 31.

<sup>15</sup> See M. LEWIS & L. ROSENBAUM, THE EFFECT OF THE INFANT ON ITS CAREGIVER (1974); Battle & Lacey, *A Context for Hyperactivity in Children Over Time*, 43 CHILD DEVEL. 757 (1972); Bell, *A Reinterpretation of the Direction of Effects in Studies of Socialization*, 75 PSYCHOLOGICAL REV. 81 (1968); Bell, *Stimulus Control of Parent or Caretaker by Offspring*, 4 DEVEL. PSYCHOLOGY 63 (1971); Bell, *Contributions of Human Infants to Caregiving and Social Interaction*, in THE EFFECT OF THE INFANT ON ITS CAREGIVER 1 (M. Lewis & L. Rosenbaum eds. 1974); R. BELL & L. HARPER, CHILD EFFECTS ON ADULTS (1977); Buss, *Conflict in Married Couples: Personality Predictors of Anger and Upset*, 59 J. PERSONALITY (1991) (forthcoming); Grusec & Kuczynski, *Direction of Effect in Socialization: A Comparison of the Parent's Versus the Child's Behavior as Determinants of Disciplinary Techniques*, 16 DEVEL. PSYCHOLOGY 1 (1980); Harper, *The Young as a Source of Stimuli Controlling Caretaker Behavior*, 4 DEVEL.

groups would be well advised to consult the literature in those fields. They would undoubtedly benefit from these disciplines' experience with causality research, methodological advances, and already developed knowledge on reciprocal interactions.

These studies provide other potentially important food for thought. For example, another set of findings suggests that a relationship may exist between certain variables (*i.e.*, attachment to parents/ caretakers, parental supervision, commitment to school, level of educational achievement, school truancy, parental attitudes toward deviant behavior, child attitudes toward deviant behavior, peer influences, and selected social and affective problems) and the initiation, escalation and desistance of delinquency, particularly for youths at different ages.<sup>16</sup> At the very least, these findings suggest the need to be cognizant of developmental issues, and that different types of intervention may be needed at different stages in a child's life. Moreover, they highlight the importance of interdisciplinary research efforts.

The researchers also suggest that "family interventions should start relatively early in the life-course, since the causal impact of attachment to parents on delinquency appears to weaken as these subjects begin to enter middle adolescence,"<sup>17</sup> where other factors, such as peer influences, tend to be stronger. Although the authors do not define "early in the life-course," the results from the well-publicized Perry Preschool study suggest that interventions might profitably begin at the preschool level.<sup>18</sup>

In the Perry Preschool Study 123 children . . . were randomly assigned either to an experimental group who attended preschool or a comparison group who did not attend; these two groups were highly similar in the characteristics of children and families. Because of their background similarities, any differences between the groups thereafter could be attributed to the preschool program. The experimental group attended a high quality program in a preschool classroom for two-and-a-half hours five mornings a week and were visited at home with their mothers for one-and-a-half hours once a week, either for

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PSYCHOLOGY 73 (1971); Harper, *The Scope of Offspring Effects: From Caregiver to Culture*, 82 PSYCH. BULL. 784 (1975); Rheingold, *The Social and Socializing Infant*, in HANDBOOK OF SOCIALIZATION THEORY AND RESEARCH 779 (D. Goslin ed. 1969); Scarr & McCartney, *How People Make Their Own Environments: A Theory of Genotype—Environment Effects*, 54 CHILD DEVEL. 424 (1983); Yarrow, Waxler & Scott, *Child Effects on Adult Behavior*, 5 DEVEL. PSYCHOLOGY 300 (1971).

<sup>16</sup> Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen & Farrington, *Initiation, Escalation and Desistance in Juvenile Offending and Their Correlates*, 82 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 36, 82 (1991).

<sup>17</sup> Thornberry, *supra* note 9, at 32.

<sup>18</sup> MILTON S. EISENHOWER FOUNDATION, YOUTH INVESTMENT AND COMMUNITY RECONSTRUCTION: STREET LESSONS ON DRUGS AND CRIME FOR THE NINETIES 11-12 (1990).

one school year at age four or two school years at ages three and four.<sup>19</sup>

At age nineteen, the youth who were in the experimental group had fewer arrests, fewer years in special education, a lower rate of dropping out of school, a higher percentage who attended college or job training courses, and a higher percentage who were employed and supporting themselves on their own and/or their spouse's earnings.<sup>20</sup>

The studies in this volume do not tell us what specific delinquency prevention and intervention activities are likely to be effective. The authors of one study concluded that "[t]he design of programs goes beyond the inferences that can be drawn from these data and requires the special expertise of treatment agents."<sup>21</sup> Hopefully, as these studies continue, they will generate data that will be more useful to policymakers and practitioners in identifying promising prevention and intervention activities.

Once promising interventions are identified, their impact will have to be carefully researched as well. Despite the billions of dollars spent at the local, state and national levels on treatment and control of delinquency each year, virtually nothing has been or is being spent on design, implementation and rigorous evaluation of promising delinquency prevention and intervention programs. For example, the Perry Preschool study is the *only* study that is cited to demonstrate the benefits of Head Start and other early childhood education programs. Congress has used the study to prevent and restore budget cuts in the Head Start program, despite the fact that the Perry study involved only 123 children in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Similarly, "only scant information exists on the nature and utility of program solutions" designed to prevent school dropouts.<sup>22</sup>

One of the primary weaknesses of the studies in this volume is their failure to explore systematically macro issues and their relationship to delinquency. Only one study found a relationship between initiation of delinquent behavior at an early age and low socio-economic status.<sup>23</sup> This inattention to macro issues is a major

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<sup>19</sup> C. Breedlove & L. Schweinhart, *The Cost-Effectiveness of High Quality Early Childhood Programs 2* (report presented at Southern Governors' Conference, Hilton Head, SC, 1982) (copies of report available through Center for the Study of Public Policies for Young Children, Ypsilanti, MI).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Thornberry, *supra* note 9, at 31.

<sup>22</sup> M. ORR, *WHAT TO DO ABOUT YOUTH DROPOUTS? A SUMMARY OF SOLUTIONS 5* (1987).

<sup>23</sup> Loeber, *supra* note 16, at 68-70.

limitation and one that raises serious questions about these studies' ultimate value.

For example, it is difficult to imagine evaluating a child's commitment to school without "exploring the role schools play in discouraging students from staying."<sup>24</sup> The role of schools is particularly important in light of recent research indicating that:

alienation from teachers and the school is a common characteristic of youth who drop out and that other factors may be overrated as predictors compared to the primary matters of students' perceptions of teacher interest in them and the effectiveness and fairness of school discipline.<sup>25</sup>

It is just as difficult to imagine exploring variables related to delinquency and delinquency prevention that do not take into account:

- The growing numbers of children living in poverty and the fact that children now constitute the largest impoverished group of citizens in the United States.<sup>26</sup> It is now estimated that approximately 12.5 million children are now living in poverty.<sup>27</sup>
- The extraordinarily high incidence of child abuse and neglect.
- The large (estimated to be 360,000) and growing numbers of children placed out of their homes and living under the care of state and local child welfare systems.<sup>28</sup>
- The widespread availability and impact of illegal drugs.
- The estimated 375,000 infants who are born drug exposed each year.<sup>29</sup> The first wave of drug exposed babies, particularly those exposed to crack, are now entering elementary schools. There are already reports that these children require extensive services and will need special care and attention for some time.
- The large number of young children who are part of our nation's homeless population.<sup>30</sup>
- The fact that one in eight children goes hungry every day.<sup>31</sup>

There are other large-scale economic, political and social forces that impact children and families. We need to learn more about these forces and determine what, if any, relationship they may have to juvenile crime.

<sup>24</sup> Orr, *supra* note 22, at 8.

<sup>25</sup> R. SMITH & C. LINCOLN, *AMERICA'S SHAME*, *supra* note 12, at 14.

<sup>26</sup> K. PHILLIPS, *THE POLITICS OF RICH AND POOR: WEALTH AND THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE IN THE REAGAN AFTERMATH 203-05* (1990).

<sup>27</sup> CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, *THE STATE OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN* 122 (1991).

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 111.

<sup>31</sup> *In Our Opinion—Food*, Detroit Free Press, § 1, at 6A (Mar. 30, 1991).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The studies by Thornberry *et al.*, Huizinga, *et al.*, and Loeber *et al.* are important because they attempt to shed light on a topic about which little is known, delinquency prevention. The preliminary findings from these studies, however, are somewhat disappointing. Hopefully, we will learn more from them in the future.

These studies explore the relationship between delinquency and individual, family and peer level variables. While this kind of research is needed, we must not lose sight of the need to examine macro level changes and forces in society that may also have an impact on juvenile crime.