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What Works With Juvenile Offenders?

A review of “graduated sanction” programs

By BARRY KRISBERG, ELLIOTT CURRIE, and DAVID ONEK

These are tough times for juvenile offenders. Across the country, there have been repeated calls to “get tougher” on young people who break the law—and those calls have often been followed by increasingly draconian responses.

States have rushed to lower the age at which juveniles can be waived to adult courts. Last year’s federal crime bill authorized half a billion dollars to support new prisons for youths. And the revision of that bill now working its way through the new Republican-dominated Congress would slash its funding for youth-oriented prevention programs in favor of still more billions for new prison construction. In many states, funds for rehabilitative programs—such as intensive probation supervision, aftercare, and vocational training—have dried up while prison budgets have skyrocketed.

Part of the rationale for these developments is the claim that nothing but incarceration “works” with serious juvenile offenders. This is by no means the first time that claim has surfaced; it has had a powerful influence on our thinking about appropriate responses to juvenile crime as far back as the mid-1970s. But in the nineties it has taken on an unprecedented virulence. Programs designed to prevent delinquency or to rehabilitate young offenders are routinely derided as “pork”; at best, they are described as well-intentioned but naive efforts to use “social work” to address what only harsh punishment can solve.

Public perception not borne out by research

A careful consideration of the evidence for that popular view finds it wanting. Criminologists have suspected for many years that some kinds of intervention programs for juvenile offenders do indeed “work” to prevent recidivism and often do so far more cheaply than imprisonment.

Under a grant from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) recently analyzed a vast array of materials on interventions with young offenders. Our research confirms a more optimistic view.

We found, unsurprisingly, that not everything works; not all programs to turn around young offenders make a difference. But some programs do work—and, increasingly, we are coming to understand why they work. The overall finding is clear: The idea that rehabilitation is nothing more than useless “pork” is a myth. And it is a myth that dramatically hobbles our ability to cope with serious juvenile crime.

Graduated sanction programs for juvenile offenders are one type of solution being explored by states across the nation. Types of graduated sanctions include:

- immediate sanctions, which are appropriate for first-time, nonviolent offenders;
- intermediate sanctions, which target repeat minor offenders and first-time serious offenders; and
- secure care, which is reserved for repeat serious and violent offenders.

In a model graduated sanctions system, the majority of youths are placed in community-based immediate and intermediate sanction programs while secure care is reserved for the violent few.

Research has been conducted on individual programs and statewide systems, and there have been meta-analyses of large numbers of individual studies. Drawing from all of this research, it is possible to determine the common characteristics of effective graduated sanction programs.

Studies on graduated sanctions

The research on graduated sanctions for juveniles is uneven. There are some areas with fairly strong results, but others in which research data are almost nonexistent.

One reason for the overall dearth of graduated sanctions research is that
such studies are quite difficult to conduct. Large samples are rare because there are usually small numbers of serious juvenile offenders. Small sample sizes make it very difficult to find statistically significant results. This is particularly true of programs for the most serious offenders, where the numbers of offenders are especially small.

Another common problem in graduated sanctions research is finding comparable control groups. It is difficult to design a study with random assignment (where individuals are randomly assigned to different programs so the results can be compared without concern about selection bias) because practitioners often resist it. But without random assignment, researchers must find a control group that is comparable to the experimental group.

Such control groups often are not carefully selected or the differences between the two groups are not taken into account in the analysis. The result is that it is often impossible to tell if differences between the outcomes of the experimental and control groups were due to differences between the experimental and control programs or to the types of youths each program served.

This said, some types of graduated sanction programs have been adequately researched. There has been fairly extensive testing of highly structured alternative programs for youths who otherwise would be incarcerated. There are also some solid studies of intensive supervision programs.

Still, there are many large gaps in the research. Very little work has been done on programs for violent offenders—the Violent Juvenile Offender study (discussed below) is an exception. There is also a paucity of research on aftercare, and the research that does exist is mixed at best. The vast majority of intermediate sanction programs have been poorly evaluated, if at all.

Some conclusions can be drawn from the limited body of research that does exist. Community-based graduated sanction programs seem to be at least as successful as traditional incarceration programs in reducing recidivism. Studies of the best-structured graduated sanction programs have shown them to be more effective than incarceration. In addition, community-based programs often cost significantly less than their traditional counterparts.

Individual programs

Nothing works? In the 1970s, Martinson's claim that "nothing works" with juvenile offenders was widely disseminated among criminal justice researchers. (Robert Martinson, What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform, 36 Pub. Interest 22-45 (1974).) Martinson and his followers argued that it was fruitless to attempt to rehabilitate juvenile offenders; instead, they recommended a greater focus on deterrence and incapacitation.

In the late 1970s and afterward,
however, Martinson's conclusion came under critical scrutiny. There is a substantial and growing body of evidence that some things do work with juvenile offenders. Indeed, Martinson himself renounced his earlier views in the late 1970s. (Robert Martinson, New Findings, New Views: A Note of Caution regarding Sentencing Reform, 7 Hofstra L. Rev. 242–58 (1979).)

**California Youth Authority.** Studies since the 1960s have shown community-based programs to be at least as effective as traditional correctional programs. In the 1960s the California Youth Authority, as part of the Community Treatment Project, randomly assigned youths to either an intensive community-treatment program, with caseloads no larger than twelve, or traditional training schools.

Early results showed that the community-based group did better than the traditional group. (Ted Palmer, California's Community Treatment Program for Delinquent Adolescents, 8 J. Res. in Crime & Delinq. 74–82 (1971).)

After one year, the rate of parole failure for the community group was 18 percent, compared to a rate of 35 percent for the traditional group; after two years, the community group had a parole failure rate of 39 percent, compared to 60 percent for the traditional group.

A later study, though critical of claims for this level of success, concluded that the community group fared no worse than the traditional group. (Paul Lerman, Community Treatment and Social Control (Univ. of Chicago Press 1975).)

**Silverlake.** The Silverlake experiment, conducted by Empey and Lubeck, studied juvenile offenders from Los Angeles County who were randomly assigned to either a county correctional facility (the control group) or a small, community-based program that emphasized daily school attendance and intensive group therapy (the experimental group). (Lamar Empey & Steven Lubeck, The Silverlake Experiment (Alpine 1971).)

The rearest rates for the two groups were virtually identical—60 percent for the experimental group versus 56 percent for the control group. Empey and Lubeck concluded that enhanced community-based programs were as effective as traditional correctional placements. Significantly, the community program cost $1,700 per youth per year while the traditional program cost $4,600.

**Provo.** A similar study was conducted by Empey and Erickson in Provo, Utah. (Lamar Empey & Maynard Erickson, The Provo Experiment (Lexington Books 1972.).) Youths were randomly assigned to either traditional probation or to intensive probation, which included daily counseling sessions.

These two groups were compared to each other and also to a group of youths released from training schools across the state, although the training school youths were not randomly assigned. Both of the groups that remained in the community had lower recidivism rates than the training school group.

The probation groups averaged 2.4 new arrests over the four-year tracking period, while the training school group averaged 5.3 new arrests. The intensive probation group fared significantly better than the traditional probation group, although these differences leveled out after one year.

**UDIS.** A study by Murray and Cox of the Unified Delinquency Intervention Services (UDIS) programs in Chicago found something similar using a new outcome measure—the “suppression effect,” or reductions in the frequency of reoffending. (Charles Murray & Louis Cox, Beyond Probation (Sage 1979)).

The study compared youths assigned to a UDIS alternative program with youths sent to traditional Department of Corrections facilities. The youths in both groups showed large reductions in the incidence of reoffending. The most intensive of the UDIS programs produced suppression effects comparable to institutionalization.

**VisionQuest.** Greenwood and Turner evaluated the San Diego VisionQuest program, which served as an alternative to incarceration for serious juvenile offenders. (Peter Greenwood & Susan Turner, The VisionQuest Program: An Evaluation (RAND 1987.).)

VisionQuest youths spent 12–15 months in various challenging outdoor “impact” programs, with a consistent education plan and individual treatment plan following them through each program stage. In the Greenwood and Turner study, the outcomes for VisionQuest graduates were compared to those of delinquent youths who had been placed in a traditional correctional institution operated by the county.

In spite of the fact that the experimental VisionQuest group consisted of more serious offenders than the control group, the VisionQuest group outperformed the controls. VisionQuest youths were substantially less likely to be rearrested in the first year after release than the traditional group (55% vs. 71%). When differences in group characteristics were statistically controlled, it was determined that first-year rearrest rates for VisionQuest youths were about half that of the controls.

**FANS.** Still more recently, Henggeler et al. completed an experimental study of South Carolina's Family and Neighborhood Services (FANS) program. This public program utilizes the principles of “multisystemic” therapy—a “highly individualized family- and home-based treatment” designed to deal with offenders in the context of their family and community problems. (Scott Henggeler et al., Family Preservation Using Multisystemic Therapy: An Effective Alternative to Incarcerating Serious Juvenile Offenders, 60(6) J. Consulting & Clinical Psychol. (1992).)

FANS targeted serious and violent offenders at imminent risk of out-of-home placement. The program employed masters-level therapists who worked with very small caseloads (four families each) over an average of slightly more than four months. The case-
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workers were available on a twenty-four-hour basis and saw the juvenile and/or the family as often as once daily, usually in the home.

Youths in the study were randomly assigned either to FANS or to normal probation treatment, in which few services were provided. The evaluation found that experiments outperformed controls. At fifty-nine weeks after the initial referral, there were significant positive differences in rates of incarceration, arrests, and self-reported offenses between FANS youths and controls.

Youths in the FANS program acquired only about half as many arrests as the controls; 68 percent of controls experienced some incarceration versus 20 percent of the FANS group. These findings were reinforced by self-report measures and by favorable changes among the FANS group in family cohesion and reduced aggression with peers.

**IPP.** Studies of intensive probation programs for youthful offenders come to similar conclusions. Barton and Butts, for example, completed an evaluation of the Wayne County Intensive Probation Program (IPP) in Detroit, Michigan. (William Barton & Jeffrey Butts, *The Metro County Intensive Supervision Experiment* (Inst. for Soc. Res. 1988).)

Youths in IPP were placed into one of three alternative programs: an intensive supervision program run by the state, a family preservation program run by a private provider, or a day treatment program run by a private provider.

In the Barton and Butts evaluation, the experimental group consisted of youths assigned to one of these three programs, while the control group contained youths placed in a state institution. Youths were randomly assigned to one of the two groups.

The researchers found that the overall performances of the experimental and control groups were comparable over a two-year follow-up period. In addition, IPP programs cost less than one-third as much as incarceration—Barton and Butts estimated that the programs saved $8.8 million over three years.


ISU provided case-management and surveillance services to its youths. A comprehensive treatment plan was developed for each youth. ISU probation officers have average caseloads of only fifteen youths. Wiebush used a quasi-experimental design to compare the outcomes for ISU youths with a group of youths who were eligible for ISU but instead were incarcerated and then released to parole supervision.

Analysis of the youths' pre-program characteristics showed that there were few differences. Outcome measures included rearrest, readjudication, and incarceration. All youths were tracked for their first eighteen months in the community.

The results showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups in the extent or seriousness of recidivism, except that the ISU youth had more technical violations. It was concluded that ISU was as effective as incarceration for serious offenders. Moreover, ISU cost just $6,020 per year, compared to $32,320 for incarceration.

**VJO.** Fagan conducted an in-depth study of the Violent Juvenile Offender (VJO) program, which provided a continuum of care for violent juvenile offenders in four urban sites. (Jeffrey Fagan, *Treatment and Reintegration of Violent Juvenile Offenders: Experimental Results*, 7 Just. Q. 233-63 (1990).)

VJO youths were initially placed in small, secure facilities and were gradually reintegrated into the community through community-based residential programs followed by intensive supervision. There was continuous case management starting in secure care and extending through the reintegration phases. Eligible youths were randomly assigned to experimental VJO programs or traditional juvenile corrections programs.

In Boston and Detroit, the two sites (out of four total sites) with the strongest implementation of the program design, VJO youths had significantly fewer and less serious rearrests than the control group when time at risk was taken into account. In addition, youths in these two sites had significantly longer intervals until their first arrest, regardless of time at risk.

Fagan concluded that “the principles and theories built into [VJO] programs can reduce recidivism and serious crime among violent juvenile offenders.” (Id. at 254.) Further, Fagan stated that “reintegration and transition strategies should be the focus of correctional policy, rather than lengthy confinement in state training schools with minimal supervision upon release.” (Id. at 233.)

**Skillman.** Not every study, to be sure, is as encouraging. Although the Fagan study seemed to reaffirm the importance of aftercare supervision, an evaluation by Greenwood et al. of experimental aftercare programs in Detroit and Pittsburgh found different results. (Peter Greenwood, Elizabeth Piper Deschenes & John Adams, *Chronic Juvenile Offenders: Final Results from the Skillman Aftercare Experiment* (RAND 1993).)

The two experimental programs shared common core features, including prerelease planning involving the aftercare worker, youth, and family; an intensive level of supervision, including several daily contacts; efforts to resolve family problems; efforts to involve the youth in community activities; and highly motivated caseworkers.

Youths in the study, all of whom were returning home from residential placement, were randomly assigned either to one of the experimental aftercare programs or to traditional post-release supervision. There were no significant differences between the experimental and control groups in the number of rearrests, number of convictions, and severity of offenses. There were also no significant differences between the groups in self-reported offenses.

An explanation offered by the authors for these disappointing results is the difficulty, as discussed earlier, in finding significant differences when there are small sample sizes. Each site had a sample of approximately fifty experimental and fifty control youths.

Greenwood et al. concluded that “the levels of intensive aftercare super-
vision and services for chronic juvenile offenders, as provided in this demonstration project, appear to have had much less effect on subsequent behavior than many of the advocates of aftercare or intensive supervision had hoped." (Id. at xii.)

Effective alternatives. Taken together, these studies of community-based graduated sanction programs show that such programs can serve as safe, cost-effective alternatives to incarceration for many youths. Even the less favorable studies we have discussed show community-based programs to be as effective as traditional training schools in reducing recidivism. And the more encouraging studies suggest that when alternative programs are carefully conceived and well-implemented, they can be more effective.

State systems

In addition to studies of individual graduated sanction programs, studies have been conducted of state systems that emphasize graduated sanctions.

Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) places less emphasis on incarceration than perhaps any other state system in the nation. In 1972, Massachusetts closed down its traditional training schools.

Today, the state relies on a sophisticated network of small, secure programs for violent youths coupled with a broad range of highly structured community-based programs for the majority of committed youths. Most of these community-based programs are operated by private nonprofit agencies under contract with DYS. Secure facilities are reserved for only the most serious offenders (approximately 15% of all commitments). The largest of these secure programs houses just twenty offenders.

The impact of the Massachusetts system was initially studied by Coates et al. in the late 1970s. (Robert Coates, Alden Miller & Lloyd Ohlin, Diversity in a Youth Correctional System (Ballinger 1978).) Coates and his colleagues compared the outcomes of a sample of youths released from the newly established community-based programs in 1974 with a group released from Massachusetts training schools in 1968, before the state's reforms were enacted.

The researchers reported that the average recidivism rates for youths in the community-based programs sample were actually higher than for youths in the training school sample (74% vs. 66%). This finding may be partially explained by a decrease in less serious offenders being committed to DYS.

In any case, a closer analysis of the data revealed that in those parts of the state where community programs were properly implemented, recidivism rates were equal or slightly lower than the training school sample. The authors concluded that "regions that most adequately implemented the reform measures with a diversity of programs did produce decreases in recidivism over time." (Id. at 177.) In addition, community program youths throughout the state showed better attitudinal adjustment than institutionalized youths.

In 1989, NCCD completed a second study of the Massachusetts system. (Barry Krisberg, James Austin & Patricia A. Steele, Unlocking Juvenile Corrections (NCCD 1989).)

NCCD's research on the Massachusetts community-based approach revealed recidivism rates that were as good as or better than most other jurisdictions. DYS youths showed a significant decline in the incidence and severity in offending in the twelve months after entry into DYS community programs as compared to the pre-DYS period. These declines in offending were sustained over the next two years.

NCCD also found that the Massachusetts approach was cost-effective: Massachusetts saved an estimated $11 million annually by relying on community-based care.

Utah. NCCD also studied the Utah juvenile justice system, which like Massachusetts, relies on community-based programs for most committed youths. (Barry Krisberg et al., The Impact of Juvenile Court Sanctions (NCCD 1988).)

Using a pre/post test design, the study found that although a high proportion of youths were rearrested, there was a substantial "suppression effect"—youths showed large declines in the frequency and severity of offending after correctional intervention.

Maryland. Gottfredson and Barton found different results in a study of the closing of the Montrose Training School in Maryland. (Denise C. Gottfredson & William H. Barton, Deinstitutionalization of Juvenile Offenders (Univ. of Md. 1992).)

The experimental group consisted of youths committed to the Maryland Division of Youth Services after Montrose had been closed. These youths were placed in community-based programs. The control group was youths who had been incarcerated in Montrose before it was closed.

The researchers found that the control group outperformed the experimental group on most recidivism measures. This result is similar to the original Massachusetts study completed by Coates et al., although those earlier researchers found positive results in the regions with strong program implementation.

The Maryland study, like the original Massachusetts study, was conducted immediately after the closing of a training school when community-based programs were at the earliest stage of implementation. It may be that these community-based programs need to operate and improve for several years before positive results will be found, as NCCD's later Massachusetts study suggests.

Resources conserved and recidivism reduced. These studies suggest that states with well-implemented graduated sanction systems are as effective at reducing recidivism as states that rely on traditional approaches. In addition, states employing graduated sanction systems save significant resources, which can be shifted to delinquency prevention programs.

Meta-analyses

Meta-analysis is an analytic technique that synthesizes results across multiple program evaluations. Several recent meta-analyses have again rekindled the claim that "nothing works" with juvenile offenders and supported the notion that rehabilitation can be ef-
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fective, particularly when it is delivered in a community setting. The meta-analyses also point to specific strategies that appear more promising than others.


His analysis incorporates 443 such studies, 373 of which were published between 1970 and 1987, including studies of both institutional and community-based programs. All of the studies had experimental designs.

Lipsey found that 64 percent of the study outcomes favored the treatment group, 30 percent favored the control group, and 6 percent favored neither group. The primary outcome measure in 85 percent of the studies was formal contact with the police or juvenile justice system (arrests, police contact, court contact, probation contact, parole contact, institutionalization, or institutional disciplinary contact).

Programs employing behaviorally oriented, skill-oriented, and multidimensional treatment methods—methods employed by many of the graduated sanction programs discussed earlier—produced larger effects than other treatment approaches. Deterrence and "shock" approaches—methods employed by control-based incarceration programs—were associated with negative results.

In addition, Lipsey found that the successful treatment approaches produced larger positive effects in community rather than institutional settings, providing strong support for community-based graduated sanction programs.


Most (81%) of the studies were from institutional treatment programs; the rest (19%) were from community residential treatment programs. Three-fourths of the studies involved a control group; the remaining one-fourth used a pre/post design with no comparison group. The outcome measures used varied from study to study and included recidivism, institutional adjustment, psychological adjustment, and academic performance.

Garrett found that the treatment groups, on average, outperformed the controls on these outcome measures. She concluded that the results "are encouraging in that adjudicated delinquents were found to respond positively to treatment on many criteria. The change was modest in some cases, substantial in others, but overwhelmingly in a positive direction." (Id. at 306.)

Behavioral treatment showed larger positive effects than psychodynamic treatment or life skills treatment. The individual treatment approaches with the largest positive effects were contingency management, family therapy, and cognitive-behavioral. Garrett concluded that "the results of the meta-analysis suggest that treatment of adjudicated delinquents in an institutional or community residential setting does work." (Id. at 287.)

Whitehead and Lab. A less encouraging study was Whitehead and Lab's meta-analyses of fifty studies of institutional and community-based programs. (John T. Whitehead & Steven P. Lab, A Meta-Analysis of Juvenile Correctional Treatment, 26 J. Res. in Crime & Delinq. 276–95 (1989).) The researchers concluded that "correctional treatment has little effect on recidivism." (Id. at 291.) This conclusion, however, was based on an extremely rigid definition of successful treatment.

Andrews et al. Whitehead and Lab's conclusion was challenged by Andrews et al. in a meta-analyses which included forty-five of the fifty studies used by Whitehead and Lab. (D.A. Andrews et al., Does Correctional Treatment Work? A Clinically Relevant and Psychologically Informed Meta-Analysis, 28 Criminology 369–404 (1990).) The researchers added thirty-five studies of both juvenile and adult programs to their analysis. The researchers coded the programs into four categories. Programs had either (1) "appropriate" correctional service; (2) "inappropriate" correctional service; (3) unspecified correctional service; or (4) non-service criminal sanctioning.

The appropriate correctional service group included

(1) service delivery to higher risk cases, (2) all behavioral programs (except those involving delivery of service to lower risk cases), (3) comparisons reflecting specific responsivity-treatment comparisons, and (4) nonbehavioral programs that clearly stated that criminogenic need was targeted and that structured intervention was employed.

(Id. at 379.) The inappropriate correctional service included

(1) service delivery to lower risk cases and/or mismatching according to a need/responsivity system, (2) nondirective relationship-dependent and/or unstructured psychodynamic counseling, (3) all milieu and group approaches with an emphasis on within-group communication and without a clear plan for gaining control over precriminogenic modeling and reinforcement, (4) nondirective or poorly targeted academic and vocational approaches, and (5) "Scared Straight."

(Id.)

Andrews et al. found that programs with appropriate correctional service had the most positive outcomes, followed by unspecified correctional service. Inappropriate service and nonservice criminal sanctioning were both associated with negative outcomes.
vice criminal sanctioning were both associated with negative outcomes.

The authors reaffirmed the importance of rehabilitation, concluding that "appropriate correctional service appears to work better than criminal sanctions not involving rehabilitative service and better than services less consistent with . . . principles of effective rehabilitation." (Id. at 384.)

Palmer. In a comprehensive review of the existing meta-analyses, Palmer summarized the findings into four main points (Ted Palmer, The Re-Emergence of Correctional Interventions (Sage 1992)):

1. When individual programs were grouped together and analyzed as a single, generic approach (e.g., counseling), many approaches did not seem to successfully reduce recidivism.

2. Despite the above finding in regard to groups of programs, there were many individual programs that seemed successful. The experimental group outperformed the controls in many or most individual programs. Specifically, experimental groups significantly outperformed controls in at least 25 percent to 35 percent of all programs, while controls significantly outperformed experimental in just under 10 percent. Statistically successful individual programs could be found in almost every generic program category, even if the category as a whole seemed unsuccessful.

3. Although generic approaches may not have been shown to have better outcomes, some were associated with equal outcomes. Such approaches seem to be as effective as traditional approaches, and often cost much less.

4. At the generic level, the interventions considered most successful were behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, skill-oriented or life skills, multimodal, and family intervention.

Palmer concluded that "the large number of positive outcomes that have been found in the past three decades with studies whose designs and analysis were at least adequate leaves little doubt that many programs work." (Id. at 76.)

What works

Rehabilitation important. These meta-analyses serve to rebuke the claim that nothing works with juvenile offenders and reaffirm the importance of rehabilitation. They suggest that rehabilitation is more successful in community rather than institutional settings. In addition, they point to specific interventions—such as behavioral, skill-oriented, and multimodal approaches—that seem more successful than others.

Research literature on critical components. In the past, several researchers have identified what they believe are the critical components of successful programs for delinquent youths. Altschuler and Armstrong, for example, cited six key components:

- continuous case management;
- emphasis on reintegration and reentry services;
- opportunities for youth achievement and involvement in program decision making;
- clear and consistent consequences for misconduct;
- enriched educational and vocational programming; and
- a variety of forms of individual, group, and family counseling matched to youths' needs.

(David Altschuler & Troy Armstrong, Intervening with Serious Juvenile Offenders, in Violent Juvenile Offenders (Robert Mathias et al. eds., NCCD 1984).)

Greenwood and Zimring also identified several features essential for program success. (Peter Greenwood & Frank Zimring, One More Chance: The Pursuit of Promising Intervention State-
those distinguished by Altschuler and Armstrong, include:

- providing opportunities for success and development of positive self-image;
- bonding youths to prosocial adults and institutions;
- providing frequent, timely, and accurate feedback for both positive and negative behavior;
- reducing the influence of negative role models;
- requiring youths to recognize and understand thought processes that rationalize negative behavior;
- creating opportunities for juveniles to discuss childhood problems; and
- adapting program components to meet the needs of each individual youth.

NCCD findings on critical components. Our review of the research literature lends support to the factors identified by these researchers and also points to additional components critical to the effectiveness of graduated sanction programs. NCCD found that the programs that work most reliably are those that actually address key areas of risk in a youth’s life and seek in a variety of ways to strengthen the factors, personal and institutional, that make for healthy adolescent development; provide adequate support and supervision; and offer a long-term stake in the community.

These principles apply to youths at all levels of a graduated sanction system. What is most important, the research suggests, is not so much the particular stage of intervention as the quality, intensity, direction, and appropriateness of the intervention itself. (Cf. Andrews et al. supra.)

It is important to sort out what the emerging literature tells us in order to provide a more coherent view of what seems clearly promising or just as clearly ineffective, and what seems potentially useful but about which we know too little, so far, to be definitive.

What does not work

We may start with a brief note of what clearly does not seem to work. This category includes conventional individual psychological counseling, in or out of the juvenile justice system; “deterrence” approaches such as “Scared Straight”; and most peer-group counseling strategies that simply gather offenders together to talk, without more substantial intervention that addresses the deeper conditions that affect their lives (Cf. Joy G. Dryfoos, Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention 145-47 (Oxford Univ. Press 1990.).

One step up is a range of programs where clear-cut evidence of effectiveness in reducing recidivism or deflecting delinquent careers is slender at best, but where the scattered evidence of success on those dimensions is augmented by more solid evidence that the programs can make a difference in other realms.

This category includes short-term community service, restitution, and mediation programs, among others. There is only limited evidence, for example, that restitution programs have reduced offending. (See Anne Schneider, Restitution and Recidivism Rates of Juvenile Offenders: Results from Four Experimental Studies, 24(3) Criminology (1986.).

On the other hand, some recent evaluations do suggest that restitution programs increase both offenders’ and victims’ satisfaction with the justice process, deliver important restitution in the form of financial repayments and/or community service, and make victims less fearful of being victimized again. (Mark S. Umbreit & Robert B. Coates, The Impact of Mediating Victim-Offender Conflict: An Analysis of Programs in Three States, 43(1) Juv. & Fam. Ct. J. (1992.).

There are some common threads in all of these negative or inconclusive findings. Such programs are often “one shot” or short term. Even those that are longer term rarely take on any of the key problems or social/personal deficits that probably got the youth into trouble in the first place.

If a longer term program does attempt to tackle key problems, it often treats the issues as isolated from the rest of the young person’s life. The program rarely has a clear developmental rationale underlying it, and it does not attempt to alter the youth’s “ecological...
or institutional situation by working to improve such things as family functioning, the youth's goodness of fit with the school, or opportunities for productive and meaningful work.

Themes for success

The programs that clearly do seem to make a difference are, by the same token, those that engage youths' problems and deficits, have an underlying developmental rationale (if often a broad one), and try to alter the institutional and ecological conditions that most affect youths' lives.

As earlier reviews of the evidence have repeatedly found, overall implementation factors such as the consistency and integrity of the intervention are generally more important than the specific "model" of intervention or its specific theoretical underpinning. (See, e.g., W.E. Wright & M.C. Dixon, Community Prevention and Treatment of Juvenile Delinquency: A Review of Evaluation Studies, 14 J. Res. in Crime & Delinq. 35-67 (1977).)

But within that general picture there are some crucial themes that we believe appear again and again in the most successful and carefully evaluated programs. These themes apply at the substantive level.

- Programs are "holistic" (or "comprehensive" or "multisystemic"), dealing with many aspects of youths' lives simultaneously, as needed.
- Programs are intensive, often involving multiple contacts weekly or even daily with at-risk youths.
- Programs mostly—though not exclusively—operate outside the formal juvenile justice system under a variety of auspices: public, nonprofit, or university.
- Programs build on youths' strengths rather than focus on their deficiencies.
- Programs adopt a socially grounded approach to understanding a youth's situation and dealing with it, rather than a mainly individual or medical-therapeutic approach.

As is true of virtually every intervention into any kind of problematic behavior, the programs that work on the process or implementation level tend to be those that are continued over a reasonably long time, are reasonably "dose-intensive," are delivered by energetic and committed if not necessarily highly trained staff, and do what they set out to do—that is, possess "therapeutic integrity."

Another critical program component is systematic case management. Successful programs have a case-management system that begins at intake and follows youths through the different program phases until discharge. Individual treatment plans are developed to address the specific needs of each youth and are updated on a regular basis.

Successful programs provide frequent feedback, both positive and negative, to youths on their progress. Positive behavior is acknowledged and rewarded, while clear and consistent sanctions are given for negative behavior.

Education, vocational training, and counseling strategies can be effective if they are intensive and tied to the individual needs of juveniles. The most effective type of counseling seems to be that which employs a cognitive-behavioral approach. The counseling component should include family counseling in addition to individual and group counseling because many of the problems faced by youths are caused or exacerbated by family dysfunction.

Family issues are just one of several key areas in the lives of youths that must be addressed in treatment. Successful programs also typically deal with issues relating to community, peers, school, and work.

It is far more productive to work on these issues when youths remain living with their families, or at least remain in their own communities, while receiving treatment. Of course, for public safety reasons, community-based treatment is not always appropriate, and families, increasingly, may be dysfunctional or nonexistent. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that youths should always be treated in the least restrictive environment possible.

Intensity of service for youths who remain in the community is critical. Successful community programs have low caseloads, ensuring that youths receive constant and individualized attention. Frequent face-to-face contacts, telephone contacts, and contacts with parents, teachers, and employers are essential in order to provide close monitoring and consistent support for youths. This type of service is most successful if its intensity is gradually diminished over a long period of time.

Finally, successful programs gradually reintegrate youths into their homes and communities. Intensive aftercare services are crucial to program success, particularly for residential programs.

Graduated sanctions reduce recidivism and costs

The research literature clearly shows that community-based graduated sanction programs are at least as effective as, and sometimes more effective than, traditional incarceration programs. In addition, graduated sanction programs usually cost far less than their traditional counterparts.

The results of this review also point the way toward an understanding of the crucial elements of success in graduated sanction programs for young offenders. We can say with some confidence that some things do work—when they are carefully conceived, properly implemented, and provided with enough resources to do the job they set out to do. As we have seen, a number of past and present programs across the country have achieved creditable results using some combination of these elements of success.

Again, it is important to stress that good intentions are not sufficient. It would be a mistake to abandon the idea that nothing works only to adopt the equally misleading view that everything does. And there is still a great deal to be learned about which specific kinds of interventions work best, with which types of offenders, and under what conditions.

But what is strikingly clear from this research is that the headlong rush to ever-greater incarceration in the name of "getting tough on young thugs" is unjustified. For all but the truly violent few, investing in a continuum of graduated care makes better sense in every dimension—for our youth, for our communities, and, not least, for our pocketbooks.