



# JUVENILE JUSTICE

Causes and Correlates:  
Findings and Implications

Also

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OJJDP

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# JUSTICE MATTERS

## A Community Approach to Reducing Risk Factors

by Susan H. Chibnall and Kate Abbruzzese

By 2000, OJJDP's Title V Community Prevention Grants Program provided incentive grants and capacity-building tools to nearly 1,100 local delinquency prevention programs nationwide. The risk and protective factor approach to prevention is the cornerstone of the Community Prevention Grants Program model. Communities that use prevention efforts with a risk and protective factor approach maximize their chances of reducing juvenile delinquency and related problems. The experiences of the three Title V communities presented below substantiate this view.

### Youth and Families with Promise

In its local risk and resource assessments, the Utah State University Cooperative Extension Service identified several local concerns involving youth—specifically, academic and behavioral problems in school and the community and a lack of parental support and involvement in structured activities. Responding to these concerns, the Cooperative Extension Service used a Title V grant to implement the

Youth and Families with Promise (YFP) program in Carbon and Weber Counties, UT.

YFP, a multigenerational mentoring program, targets youth ages 10–14 who exhibit low self-confidence, act out in school or the community, or are experiencing academic difficulty. Mentors tutor youth in reading and academic skills and participate with them in structured group settings, including recreational and community service activities. Youth, their parents, and their mentors also attend “Family Night Out,” a monthly event designed to strengthen family bonds.

In 2000, a self-evaluation of the program found that family relationships improved and that youth demonstrated greater respect for parents and increased self-confidence. Youth also demonstrated improved attitudes toward school, completed more homework, received better grades, and engaged in less cheating, truancy, violence, and visits to the principal's office. Among youth who had been involved in problem behaviors in the community, there were statistically significant decreases in police referrals and incidents of stealing, damaging or destroying property,

alcohol consumption, gang activity, and violence. In addition, parents reported praising their children more often, feeling less overwhelmed and closer to them, and responding more consistently to their behavior problems.

### Parent Project

Concerned with the number of youth accused of destructive behaviors, a number of citizens in Minidoka County, ID, joined forces to implement the Parent Project, a research-based program created for parents with difficult or out-of-control adolescents. Since the program's implementation in 1997, nearly 1,000 families in Minidoka County have attended Parent Project classes.

To help curb poor school performance, substance use, violence, and similar behaviors, the program helps parents learn and practice identification, prevention, and intervention strategies (e.g., establishing rules and expectations, learning how to discipline). During weekly sessions for 10 to 16 weeks, facilitators provide activity-based instruction and

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step-by-step plans to help parents learn how to manage adolescent behavior problems at home. Parents also attend support groups where they receive emotional and practical support from facilitators and other parents and practice implementing newly acquired skills and techniques (e.g., addressing problem behaviors, managing conflict, building positive self-concepts in their children).

The program also trains court and school staff and other youth-involved groups in parenting techniques and offers a teen component that stresses good decisionmaking skills and resilience-based characteristics (e.g., community involvement, positive relationships with adults). Using a Title V grant, Minidoka County expanded the project to include an educator component for use in schools; this component has helped the project provide a more comprehensive approach to identified risk factors.

According to a program evaluation study, the number of petitions filed for juvenile offenses decreased 33 percent, the number of minors on probation for any cause declined more than 30 percent, the number of drug-related probation violations was down 20 percent, and the number of days spent by youth in detention decreased 24 percent. In addition, the school dropout rate fell from 17 percent to 0 percent, and school expulsions plummeted

from 72 to 0. The Parent Project was recognized for its achievements by the Idaho Supreme Court in 1999 and is the state's model for programs involving the prevention of juvenile crime.

## Adopt-A-Class

After identifying several risk factors present in the community—including the availability of drugs and alcohol, early onset of problem behaviors, and family management problems—community leaders in Easton, PA, used a Title V grant to implement a program appropriate to its risk-factor profile: Adopt-A-Class (AAC).

AAC is a school-based program designed to provide youth with mentors with whom they can develop a prosocial bond and who can assist them with schoolwork and family life issues. The program, which was implemented in 1999, is following a cohort of students from fifth grade through their high school graduation. Community volunteers serving as mentors work with students in school for one class period per week. In these sessions, students and mentors engage in activities such as academic tutoring, reading books, and playing games together. In its first year, AAC served approximately 450 students per week with the support of 50 trained mentors.

In comparisons of students who have been involved in the program for 2 years with new students (those involved less than 2 years), 26 percent of the former group have reported a more positive attitude toward school. They also are almost three times more likely to be involved in community volunteer projects than the newer students. In addition, the Easton Area Middle School improved attendance by more than 1.3 percent in the 1999–2000 school year.

The Easton community also used Title V funds to implement Educating Children for Parenting, a program that teaches caring and compassionate behavior to young children in the hopes that such lessons will reduce their risk factors for delinquency.

## Conclusion

The findings from local communities implementing Title V provide encouraging evidence that a risk-focused prevention model can help communities facilitate positive youth development and reduce risk factors and problem behaviors. As communities continue to evaluate their prevention efforts and report positive changes, it will become easier to demonstrate that local prevention and early intervention efforts are making a difference in the lives of the nation's youth and families.