



Program Evaluation

Summary

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After-school programs offer at-risk youth services in Jefferson, Franklin counties

By Sharyn Adams

Mentoring and behavioral intervention techniques proved to be the most beneficial procedures utilized by a new therapy program introduced in two county after-school programs for at-risk youth. Program outcomes suggested that careful participant selection and program design constitute two key factors in achieving positive results for participants.

Moral reconnection therapy, designed to help youth accept responsibility for their actions and make better life decisions, was introduced into Franklin and Jefferson county evening reporting centers in February and March 2002. Evening reporting centers in those counties function as an after-school resource, providing supervision to at-risk youth in a semi-structured environment during times commonly known for delinquent activity.

An 18-month study on the moral reconnection therapy programs included both process and preliminary outcome evaluations conducted by the Policy Analysis and Public Administration Department of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. The study was supported with Anti-Drug Abuse Act funding, administered by the Authority.

Overview

The evening reporting centers in both counties provided after-school services to boys and girls ages 10 to 17 who were referred by judges, juvenile probation officers, and state's attorneys, who would divert youth in lieu of a formal adjudication. Referrals also occurred in non-arrest situations, with input from truant officers, school personnel, law enforcement officials, and parents or guardians.

The centers function as a resource for the court and other community agencies, ensuring that delinquent and at-risk youth are supervised after school five days a week. Youth receive moral reconnection therapy and other services that can aid them in addressing problems they are experiencing and help them learn to make responsible life choices.

Process evaluation

Introduction of the moral reconnection therapy treatment program represented an attempt by the court to provide intervention aimed at elevating moral reasoning and promoting pro-social behavior among participants. The therapy offered the only intensive, theory-based, structured intervention designed to increase levels of moral reasoning and empathy, help youth accept responsibility for their problem behavior, and aid them in making better decisions and setting productive, meaningful life goals.



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Table 1
Franklin County technical violations
and new offenses*

Technical violations	Number of participants	Percentage
None	52	70%
1	12	16%
2	4	5%
3	4	5%
4	2	3%
New offenses	Number of participants	Percentage
None	64	87%
1	5	7%
2	2	3%
3	2	3%
4	1	1%

*Percentages were rounded.

Jefferson County terminated use of moral reconnection therapy in mid-year 2003 when a facilitator determined that the center’s population was not amenable to the intervention. Youth involved with the Jefferson County center were often charged with more serious offenses than Franklin County youth, and were seen as more criminally sophisticated. Many also were involved with gangs.

Staff at both sites were commended by evaluators for their ability to communicate and establish rapport with youth. The evaluation noted that staff demonstrated strong commitment to helping at-risk youth, and represented a consistent positive presence in the lives of participants. The most beneficial element for youth might have been exposure to responsible, caring adults who functioned as role models and part-time mentors, and offered support, advice, and encouragement.

Program challenges

Challenges confronting successful implementation of the moral reconnection therapy programs included the lack of a clear program purpose and defined target population.

Originally intended as an alternative sentencing and intervention tool, the moral reconnection therapy program lacked comprehensive written criteria for who was

eligible for inclusion. As a result, the types of youth assigned to therapy varied widely in terms of behavioral problems, learning disorders, age range, and criminal sophistication.

The lack of a defined target population had the greatest impact at the Jefferson County site, contributing to the circumstances that brought on termination of its moral reconnection therapy program. Youth having more extensive criminal histories often influenced others toward delinquent activities and gang activity. This situation compromised the safety of other youth and staff, and diminished the program’s ability to positively affect participants’ lives.

Another challenge was that because the moral reconnection therapy program operated in isolation from the larger center program, the therapy was not utilized as an overall framework for understanding and responding to youth behavior. Probation officers and youth service providers were not apprised of the objectives and principles of moral reconnection therapy, and those objectives and principles were not reinforced outside of the treatment setting. Evaluators suggested that the therapy be systematically integrated into center activities outside of regular weekly therapy sessions to maximize its impact on participating youth.

Client information sharing also was found to be a challenge due to inconsistencies and fragmentation across participating agencies. In addition, comprehensive case management planning was infrequent. Some agency professionals in both counties who worked closely with center youth indicated they knew little or nothing about moral reconnection therapy.

Another problem area involved disparate data management and program monitoring mechanisms in the two counties. Each site maintained independent client databases and different types of data on center and moral reconnection therapy participants. Neither site had the ability to collect and analyze data to spot failure rates or detect early recidivism patterns.

Outcome evaluation

The outcome evaluation focused on the number of probation violations and new offenses committed during and after center enrollment. An analysis was conducted of the various data sets provided by Franklin and Jefferson county probation offices for the population of youth who had received treatment during the February 1, 2002, to June 30, 2004, evaluation period.

Table 2
Jefferson County technical violations
and new offenses*

Technical violations	Number of participants	Percentage
None	4	9%
1	5	11%
2	2	4%
3	2	4%
4	1	2%
5 to 9	19	42%
10 or more	12	27%
New offenses	Number of participants	Percentage
None	0	0%
1	9	20%
2	9	20%
3	8	18%
4	3	7%
5 to 9	13	29%
10 or more	3	7%

*Percentages were rounded.

Findings based on the data were hampered due to time variances between receipt of treatment by center participants. The first group had been out of the program for more than two years. The second program group included participants who either were still in the program or had been out of the program for only a few weeks.

Franklin County data indicated that 70 percent of participating youth did not receive a technical violation and 87 percent of youth did not commit a new offense during the evaluation reporting period. A total 59 violations reported for the 74 probationers included 40 technical violations and 19 new offenses committed. Eight technical violations occurred during the study period but prior to participants' entry into the Franklin County center; 10 occurred while in the center; and 22 occurred after participants left. One of the new offense violations occurred within the period studied, prior to

entry to the program; six occurred while youth were participating in the center; and 12 occurred post-program participation.

All 45 Jefferson County probationers committed at least one new offense during the reporting period of the evaluation. Offenses totaled 220 and probation violations totaled 343. Sixty-four offenses were committed within the period studied but prior to the participants entering the center, 26 occurred while participating, and 130 occurred after they left the program. Eighty-seven of the probation violations occurred within the study period but prior to the entering the program, 94 occurred while they were participating, and 162 occurred after they left the program.

Recommendations

Six recommendations for program replication were offered based on the evaluation findings. They included:

- Examining the purpose and objectives of each site and developing a set of target population guidelines.
- Ensuring these guidelines/criteria are communicated to probation staff, judges, and other community agencies from which the centers will accept referrals.
- Ensuring consistent structure and delivery of services in center programs and activities from week to week, and developing a core set of activities that are suitable for youth of varying ages and developmental levels, ensuring that the activities are tied to the overall purpose and objectives of the centers.
- Establishing a common framework between juvenile justice personnel and area service providers for understanding and responding to delinquency and at-risk youth.
- Maintaining consistent records and data on all center and therapy participants, including tracking the reason for admission, program progress, and services received in order to enhance program monitoring and evaluation capabilities.
- Considering provision of a less intensive cognitive-behavioral intervention that is accountability-based and attuned to needs and development levels of juvenile offenders for those deemed not amenable to moral reconnection therapy.

In addition, evaluators recommended that Franklin County strengthen collaboration between court service and other youth service providers to develop a forum for

routinely sharing information about youth who attend the center. This would include information on youth progress, areas of concern, and treatment planning across service providers who work with the center and moral reconnection therapy participants.

Jefferson County program administrators were encouraged to strengthen existing collaboration with youth service organizations to apprise them of the mission, target population, service delivery method, and theories, tenets and principles underlying therapeutic approaches used by one another.

Additional recommendations were made in the event moral reconnection therapy remains the program of choice for center participants in Franklin County or is reinstated in Jefferson County. They included:

- Setting specific guidelines for the type of youth who may not be appropriate for moral reconnection therapy, and provide these youth with appropriate alternative activities during therapy sessions.
- Participating in refresher training to enhance and maintain moral reconnection facilitator skills, and seeking support and assistance from program developers to ensure program goals are appropriate for therapy techniques.
- Ensuring that moral reconnection therapy facilitators meet the objectives of an accountability- and cognitive-behavior-based treatment approach.

- Training all court service and collaborative agency staff in the general principles of the cognitive behavior interventions provided, and use program principles and concepts as an overarching framework for supervision, including setting expectations, responding to problems with youth, and assessing youth progress.



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This Program Evaluation Summary was based on Research Report, “**An Evaluation of the Moral Reconnection Therapy of the Franklin/Jefferson County Evening Reporting Center Program.**”

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