

## JUVENILE RECIDIVISM: AIMING AT SUCCESS

Word Count: 3,012

### Introduction

This project will look at the prevention of recidivism in the juvenile justice system. This is a less travelled course in the current literature, though many innovations have been developed during the last few years with respect to treatment. The emphasis in recent years has been on prevention, which is where the emphasis should be placed. This paper takes the position, however, that the individuals who have slipped through the preventative measures still deserve the attention, examination and persistence of the juvenile justice system. The savings created from avoiding incarceration of adults is substantial.

Prevention of juvenile crime is a key factor currently in the juvenile justice system. Many of the studies analyzing recidivism for juveniles examine early intervention efforts that help prevent or have an effect on recidivism. Pre-school is one such indicator, suggesting that early exposure to school helps prevent juvenile crime (Mann & Reynolds, 2006). Pre-school is also an effective time to begin addressing familial problems that are capable of being addressed by the juvenile system, if necessary.

Other studies have reviewed familial indicators for successful rehabilitation from the individual incarcerated juvenile's point of view. Clearly juveniles with better familial influences are more likely to succeed in juvenile treatment programs, and more over, juvenile treatment

programs with a familial component are more successful in preventing recidivism (Latimer, 2001, p. 237). These studies differ from the work proposed by this project because they look for indicators of recidivism that exist in an offender's life prior to their first adjudication. The proposed project will look for indicators of success, a lack of reoffending, for juveniles who are already recidivists.

This attention aimed at prevention is important, however the statistics suggest that, regardless of the attention paid to prevention, there is still a significant population of juvenile offenders in need of treatment. There is a continuing need, since individuals like this are not likely to disappear, for a program that will reduce recidivism for the most difficult individuals to the greatest extent possible. One of the current strategies in the treatment of juveniles is the creation of the intensive Individual Aftercare Plan (IAP). Several versions of these plans are described in studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice (Richard G. Wiebush, 2000).

The programs are characterized by more face time with probation officers, more education services, more life skills treatment and more psychological counseling. All of these programs are transitional in nature. They help move the juvenile offender from an institutional setting back into the community. The programs provide both skills for the individual and keep them busy with productive work as they are reintroduced to a community.

The need for these programs is mirrored in the adult system, though they are generally not so generous with time or money at that point in the system. The questions asked in this project will attempt to define the extent of the success of the juvenile programs as well as the efficiency of adding time to the process.

Several other comparable programs were reviewed by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2003. The results of these programs are promising, but not yet studied properly. These programs also emphasize intensive and extended supervision and assistance (Gies, 2003). It is the structure of these programs that this project proposes to be analyzed for indicators of success in reduction of recidivism. Additional time in programs or the ineffectiveness of some programs should be investigated and evaluated. These are the issues proposed to be reviewed by this paper.

### Literature Review

A primary problem with performing studies of recidivism is the difficulty in creating suitable control groups for the examination. This is because the existence of a control group suggests that there is a group who is not obtaining the newest, and presumably the best, care from a government authority. This forces researchers to use other variables as controls for the examination of information, making it harder to isolate variables and/or reduce alternate explanations for results. The result is studies that look primarily for indicators, as opposed to studies that pursue testable results.

One study identifies indicators for recidivism according to the individuals' characteristics (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Barrett & Flaska, 2004). The independent variables identified in the study include "demographic, psychoeducational, and psychosocial variables" as possible predictors of the dependent variable recidivism. This study identifies parole violations, age of commitment and succorance as indicators of recidivism. Succorance, the ability of an individual to seek reassurance and compassion from other people, shows less correlation to recidivism than

parole violations. Parole violations, of course, are likely to be good indicators of recidivism because a parole violation suggest contempt for the legal system as well as a tendency to continue violating the law.

Limitation for this study include the fact that all of the individuals studied are from Nebraska and are predominately white, so that the study may not effectively represent many jurisdictions in the country. The study also acknowledges some of the psychosocial information is less reliable because it is the result of self reporting. Juvenile offenders, much like their criminal counterparts, are generally not reliable reporters.

Another recent study examines the relationship of family contact in the recidivism of juvenile offenders. The study does not differentiate between positive family contact and negative family contact, but identifies family contact between the juvenile authority and the juvenile for the purpose of better evaluating the individual offender (Ryan & Yang, 2005). Again, recidivism is the dependent variable. The independent variables are family contact and a number of demographic variables. Family contact was defined by the type of contact and who initiated the contact. Variables that resulted in negative correlations for recidivism included campus visits initiated by the family, home visits initiated by the social worker and in home counseling. Demographic variables identified were standard variables and the results were consistent with other studies. These variables included positive correlations for recidivism for African American juveniles, and juveniles who were younger at the time of release. The study also specifically measured for a correlation based on the length of stay in a residential facility and found none.

The next study reviews the recidivism rates of male and female individuals in Santa Barbara, CA. The study identifies its subjects as first offenders who have been adjudicated

once. Recidivism is defined as a second adjudication after release from the system after the first offense. This study identified fifty-six indicators in twelve categories (Jimerson, Sharkey, O'Brien & Furlong, 2004). The study is also unusual in terms of its demographic. The juveniles in the study are predominantly white or Mexican American.

These indicators were developed to identify risk for recidivism. Several of the indicators are evaluations administered by the parole officer. The test, the Santa Barbara Assets and Risks Assessment (SB ARA), is an accurate indicator of recidivism. The study purports to assist in understanding the causes of recidivism, but primarily offers a very good source of providing a warning with respect to certain individual juveniles in terms of their future criminal behavior.

Finally, an earlier analysis of recidivism by the same group using a younger iteration of the SB ARA emphasizes the local nature of the assessment (Jimerson, Sharkey, O'Brien & Furlong, 2003). Presumably the SB ARA resolves some of these issues; however it was used on the same demographic as this initial tool. This leaves unresolved the question of whether the assessment is valid for demographics not represented in either study.

These studies primarily predict failure. The interest in projecting failure is not without purpose. The purpose is to identify indicators. Ideally indicators provide the evaluators with help picking individual offenders for additional treatment. But these indicators do not identify which treatments are most effective for the most likely to reoffend.

This project proposes to take the next step and identify which treatments are most effective for the recidivist. This is admittedly an uphill battle, because generally the recidivist is often not successful at completing programs. The juvenile recidivist's treatment is often interrupted by additional offenses or adulthood. The transfer from juvenile to adult also removes

the interest of the system in rehabilitation. Adult penal systems are moving to better reintroduction plans in some jurisdictions, but generally rehabilitation is no longer a goal of the adult penal system.

This project will aim to identify success in the most difficult group of offenders, and to some extent it will attempt to describe the form of those successes. This description will be statistical and will not address particular or individual revelations that lead to these successes.

### Data and Methods

The project will pursue similar data collection methods to the studies described above. The project will not depend on self reporting and it will not depend on an experimental format with a control group of subjects. The basic theory is not entirely scientific. It is based on the common sense theory that it takes a certain amount of time to create an individual who is unstable and it takes an equal or longer period of time to stabilize the same individual. The author acknowledges the tendency of some individuals towards a lack of stability and toward recidivism. However the public cost spent on an individual early on in their lives which instills a way of life that prevents additional incarceration will save society large future costs. These costs include the costs of adult incarceration, the cost in lost taxes, and the costs to those injured by a recidivist's actions.

The demographic group that will be examined will be exclusively African American males. It will also focus on individuals who are recidivists. All of the individuals in the project will fit into these two categories at the time when they begin to be examined by the project. The

reason for choosing such a difficult group to examine is twofold. First, the group must be recidivists in order to evaluate the ability of a system to rehabilitate the individuals. Second, this group is easily identifiable and will have significant existing data to review.

The individuals will be chosen from urban areas with the types of programs described. At least three such programs will need to be examined in order to provide a suitable comparison of procedures. Statistical analysis techniques will be evaluated after the data is obtained. This will be an exercise in assessment techniques.

The variables that will be evaluated will include three levels of family contact, length of stay in institutional care, length of transitional care, face to face contacts with probation, length of vocational training while in care, time spent working at a job in transitional care, and time spent in life skills training. The variables will be evaluated individually for positive or negative correlation to success in rehabilitation. Success in rehabilitation will be defined as five years without re-adjudication or adult conviction. Adult conviction will include deferred sentences or participation in drug court style programs.

Family contact will be defined similarly to the study on family contact described above. It is anticipated that family contact will be minimal within the group because, if the information identified in the previous study is correct, family contact will not have been part of the recidivist's experience in treatment. The contacts will be evaluated for in home contact with offenders and counselors, institutional contacts for counseling purposes, and number of contacts while institutionalized. The initiator of the contacts will not be assessed.

Length of stay in institutional care will be tested for in terms of days spent in care. The correlation is not expected to be a positive or negative one with a lack of recidivism. The use of the variable is included in order to help verify the results. This is a well tested variable and the results should help demonstrate the validity of the assessment.

Length of transitional care is one of the key concepts of the study. Admittedly, the statistic alone would not tell an investigator much. If the quality of the transitional care is not adequate or helpful, then years of transitional care would not have a positive affect on recidivism. However, it is an indication of a program for offenders, and in combination with other variables the number of days in transitional care should be helpful as an indication of success.

Number of contacts with probation will include face to face contacts only. Probation has many contacts with offenders and some of these are simply cursory. Face to face contacts will provide another indicator of interest and persistence by the system in the subject.

The last several variables all indicate practical preparation of offenders for living a non-offending life. These include length of vocational training while in care, time spent working at a job in transitional care, and time spent in life skills training. These variables also indicate the activity of the offender during the period of institutional and transitional care.

If there are positive indicators of success for offenders the positive indicators will be combined for an anti-recidivism quotient. The variables will be combined to assess the synergistic capability of the programs.

Problems with reliability for the indicators described in the project are potentially numerous. It is easy to determine failures. The individuals reappear in the system. Successes are more difficult to identify. Individuals may have moved to another jurisdiction, they may have died or there may be other reasons for the inability to identify the individual's status in terms of



re-offending. This can be resolved to some extent by requiring all subjects to be located either through work records or incarceration records. Such a requirement will eliminate unemployed, or unconventionally employed un-incarcerated individuals from the program however.

Another difficulty with reliability of the indicators is that some of them require the individual to participate in the programs. If the individual does not participate in vocational training or life skills training, the programs will not have the desired effect even though the offender puts in some time in the program. Some of this can be controlled for by reviewing assessments made by the programs. This becomes a much more difficult problem however, because it changes a fairly objective indicator into a very subjective indicator. The assessment by the program is a subjective assessment, and additional review for the purposes of this project creates an even more subjective assessment. Since there are several of this type of indicator, it is probably better to leave these unevaluated and simply use the length of time in the programs as the indicators. Presumably advisors would not require an individual to stay in a program in which they are not participating.

## Conclusion

The primary goal of the proposed study is a determination of indicators for success of juvenile recidivists in avoiding future incarceration. Most studies recently are aimed at identifying reoffenders. Identifying recidivists is important. It is nothing more than the flip side of the coin from the proposed study. The identification of recidivists accomplishes some of the same objectives that identifying programs likely to reduce recidivism. Identifying recidivists also helps to identify what makes individuals offenders and reoffenders.

The benefits of such studies helps produce effective preschool programs and places emphasis on the early identification of family issues that are likely to lead to the creation of offenders. This type of assessment is beneficial to potential offenders and society.

But some individuals will inevitably slip through, and many perceive the juvenile system as an individual's last chance to get things straight before becoming a part of the adult criminal system. In the adult system the programs are less likely to reduce recidivism and many individuals are simply left in the adult system until they grow out of it or they simply don't get out of it.

Assessing programs in terms of their success for offenders, success in terms of avoiding future incarceration is important for individual offenders and society also. While the findings may indicate that the programs are ineffective, this is important information also. Many of these programs are relatively young, and it is time for comparison and assessment (Gies, 2003).

The investment of time in individual offenders is useful if it prevents future offenses and prevents need for future incarceration of the individuals. Even if the individuals are not employed, the costs from offenses and incarcerations are enormous. Decreasing these costs and increasing the nation's tax income from at least some of these individuals is a valuable investment for the future.

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