

# Prevention Roles for Criminal Justice Professionals

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**TRADITIONAL PROBATION** and parole services have rarely played a significant role in providing delinquency prevention services. Instead, criminal justice professionals have worked diligently to rehabilitate the adjudicated or convicted adolescent or adult offender. Their mission has been one of rehabilitation and behavioral modification and control. The parents, assisted by the church, the community, and the school, normally cooperate in raising youngsters. Only when the child-rearing and educating process breaks down do most law enforcement officers or criminal justice representatives get involved. Large caseloads' demands on officers' time have often justified the lack of prevention services—even those that are mandated in the codes of many states or jurisdictions.

But recently this situation has begun to change. The public schools, for example, have recognized the benefit of inviting a broad range of community servants to assist as partners in the field of early childhood education. They have learned from the results of the federal Head Start programs begun for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds in 1964. Children with the Head Start experience do better in the future than similar youth who lack the Head Start experience. In fact, children with two years of services do better than youth with only one year in the program. The entire family benefits from the parental inclusion, home visits, and parental education that is a part of the program. This family involvement or Head Start model can easily be expanded to create a menu of early childhood services that allow a variety of agencies access to the young children from "at risk" families. Justice system professionals have

found a place among these agencies by volunteering mediation, mentoring, tutoring, street law, and similar prevention endeavors with at-risk youth.

Research-based models have demonstrated that early childhood services can ultimately yield fewer future criminal justice clients and perhaps lower future probation caseloads. Many of the early childhood models have been highlighted in a series of Department of Justice (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) bulletins on resilience-building through family, school, and justice agency partnerships. Children benefit and participants in multi-agency projects learn a great deal from one another. Police, sheriffs, and probation agencies can often model relationship building and share their special insights with early childhood nurses, teachers, and school administrators. For their part, criminal justice professionals can learn a great deal about the families and communities they serve through the teachers who spend many hours a day with children. Safe Schools and Healthy Students programs, and others funded by federal Justice, Health and Human Services and Education agencies, have sought to benefit needy communities and "at risk" students through a variety of multi-disciplinary service delivery systems. Expanding and translating programs that have proven successful improves the lives of young children and reduces risk factors. The more *resilient* children become the less likely they are to join gangs, quit school, or live a life of delinquency and substance abuse. The children benefit and the agencies benefit from the changes in milieu and the process of collaboration. The approach is similar to that used by Red Cross

swimming or drown-proof programs. If very young children can be taught to swim at an early age, they will forever be safer when near the water. Children who can resist the temptations of the streets, who feel better about themselves, who practice conflict resolution skills, and who are law-abiding will both live longer and have better lives.

Criminal justice professionals should become aware of the SafeFutures Initiatives and the 164 current Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Juvenile Mentoring (JUMP) Programs. Both of these federally supported and initiated research-based projects focus on "at risk" populations. The SafeFutures Program (The SafeFutures Program to Reduce Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Violence) is a five-year demonstration project supported by the U. S. Department of Justice, OJJDP and the Office of Justice Programs. The initiative links research on risk and protective factors for youth with current knowledge of prevention and early intervention in juvenile delinquency. The federal programs generally follow the research findings reported in *Communities That Care* by J.D. Hawkins and R.F. Catalano (1992) on risk and protective factors. Based on what we know about the causes and development of delinquency, the federal government funded a comprehensive array of SafeFutures programs by pooling federal and local funds to provide services in nine areas. Juvenile Mentoring Programs (JUMP) takes up one of the nine approaches. One of the more obvious findings was that many citizens who might be potential volunteers or mentors are repelled by the idea of working with children who have juvenile justice records. Therefore,

deputies, officers, and other justice system employees might best serve in mentor or other prevention roles with young children who are both at risk and difficult to match with volunteers. The research also confirmed the common view that intervention or change is more difficult the more delinquent the child. In other words, early intervention works best when it is very early.

Since 1996 the JUMP programs have sought to provide one-to-one mentoring for youth at risk of juvenile delinquency, gang involvement, educational failure, or dropping out of school. In 2000 there were 164 such federally funded programs. Some of the programs are partnerships between law enforcement and local education agencies. In other models the prosocial mentors were recruited, trained, and directly supervised by law enforcement or corrections departments. The Department of Youth Services in Boston hired adults to mentor youth being discharged from juvenile detention facilities. The Contra Costa, California Volunteers in Probation (VIP) program hired staff to recruit and train volunteers to mentor youth on probation. In a Fairfax County, Virginia Juvenile Court program the local bar association offered Continuing Legal Education (CLE) credits to 25 lawyers who trained as mentors and were matched with young first-time offenders being adjudicated for truancy. In the past several years mentor programs have become valuable tools to prevent delinquency and to support the rehabilitation effort with young adjudicated youth. In some jurisdictions the law enforcement community has taught school social workers and administrators much about delinquency prevention.

In recent years probation and parole agencies have begun learning to use risk assessment instruments to guide their recommendations to the court and to determine service levels. In some states the use of a standardized risk assessment instrument is a required section of the presentence investigation and report. Underlying the use of such an instrument is the empirical belief that past behavior is the strongest predictor of future behavior. The kind of home, neighborhood, and parents a defendant comes from also affect just how likely a defendant is to recidivate. Similar risk assessment tools help substance abuse professionals determine how likely an abuser is to relapse. All such instruments can suggest the level of treatment that is needed. The same risk assessment orientation can be applied to early childhood settings and used to guide prevention services.

Some “model” suburban communities—those with low risk assessment scores or ample opportunities for youth—might need no special programs. Poorer communities with poverty, high levels of transition, addictions, domestic violence, single parents, and latch key kids score much higher in risk factors. It is in such communities that justice system professionals can best invest a small amount—perhaps only 20 or 30 minutes a week—of their time.

Some grant-funded programs offer overtime compensation to officers for their extra “volunteer” work in the community. In other programs, the police chief, sheriff, judge, or chief probation officer may recognize the benefit of positive community relations *and* prevention. Such leaders may offer compensatory time or the intangible credit or recognition that helps when performance evaluation or promotional considerations are being addressed. In most programs the criminal justice professionals visit an elementary school or apartment complex while making routine field visits. The once a week tutor or mentor program requires no added compensation, travel expense, or advance preparation. The child receiving the tutoring or mentoring need not even know exactly how this “helper” is employed.

Creative partnerships and meaningful roles with a young child or group of children can boost morale. Active involvement also helps balance realism and optimism. Working with children for even a few minutes at a time offers a nice change of pace, a breath of fresh air, or a short respite from the jail, courtroom, or street pain and pressure. And, there are other personal rewards. Rarely do criminal justice clients thank anyone for arresting them or for offering probation services. Young children, especially those from troubled homes, love to have attention. The firefighters who just drop in for a school lunch with their third grade buddies or the probation counselors who mentor once a week are routinely thanked for their time and attention. Examples of early childhood-criminal justice collaborative projects include individual, group, or class time with children and consulting time with school personnel. One large metropolitan area jurisdiction profiled below offers a number of examples of creative and flexible collaborative projects.

The Sheriffs Department, a group of 550 sworn deputies in a Washington, D.C. jurisdiction of close to a million residents, was one of the first groups to support the two-year

*Socially and Academically Resilient Children* Grant in Fairfax County, Virginia. The grant itself was one of 40 awarded to communities, schools, or agencies throughout the nation by the Center for Mental Health Services and Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. The Fairfax County grant application included the law enforcement community and was built around the theme of building resilient children through a community-based multi-agency approach. A senior Sheriffs Department administrator agreed to “adopt” a class of children who had already been suspended and transferred to one elementary school for a highly structured alternative, the Intervention and Support Program. The teachers, social worker and psychologist originally asked for an officer to visit weekly to play chess with these very high-risk fourth- and fifth-grade students. The sheriff exceeded all expectations. He set aside the last 45 minutes of the week for the students. The students looked forward to his Friday afternoon visits. He respected them and served as an honest and strong male role model. A theme of social skill teaching developed. The young men were taught to shake hands, speak clearly, and respect each other. The academic and behavioral program of the school was reinforced. The weekly visits also included a few law-related education discussions. Some of the jurisdiction’s 30 additional Intervention or alternative schools will benefit from similar programs with other deputies. Female deputies now offer physical education programs and beneficial group sessions with the girls who attend alternative secondary school programs.

As needs have been identified, the department has taken the steps to provide a true community policing and community relations service.

Probation counselors have assisted teachers or counselors charged with offering a peer mediation or conflict resolution program for the elementary school. Probation counselors often have more experience in this field than the professional educator assigned this extra duty. Trained and State Supreme Court certified mediators were recruited to adopt the 10- to 15-student peer mediation teams in the elementary school setting. One school offered a two-day (8 hours total) mini-camp for new peer mediators. These students were trained by court staff and thus were able to offer mediation services when school opened in the fall. In prior years such programs were not operational until the middle of the academic year.

Long before the JUMP initiative, the public and private schools offered student mentor programs. Mentor programs can now be found in most school systems. Youth at any age can benefit from the time and attention of a caring adult. The time spent with a designated student need not be as extensive as that demonstrated in the well regarded Big Brother or Big Sister programs. The expenditure of as little as 30 minutes a week reading with a first or second grader can be helpful. Talking about hobbies, sports, the news, or life plans with an older child can be time well spent. Almost any time spent with a child who already scores high on a hypothetical risk assessment checklist will be of benefit. Visits to the school generally occur before school or during the lunch hour to avoid interfering with the normal academic program.

The Fairfax County Police Department, a 1050 sworn officer agency, first become involved in the *resilient children* grant by providing an after-school enrichment class. Auxiliary and crime prevention officers provided a once-a-week Police Science class for a dozen students. The already streetwise eleven- and twelve-year-old volunteers for this class enjoyed weekly video tapes, mock trials, crime prevention, and substance abuse discussions. Latch-key kids would rather stay after school than go home to an empty apartment. Since this initial class, bike squad, forensic specialists, school resource, and other officers have worked with elementary school populations. The police department also offers a Walk to School Safety Program each fall. Before the opening of school, the school education or safety officers conduct meetings at school with parents and young children. They then model safe walking and the buddy system and have crime prevention discussions as the group actually walks through the community. For many kindergarten children, this is the start of a relationship with the police department.

Court staff have assisted school administrators in dealing with non-attendance or truancy at the elementary school level. A paradigm shift in thinking has occurred in schools. Many communities, both urban and suburban, report a high incidence of daytime residential breaking and entering. Secondary school students often commit these offenses while skipping school. Police departments occasionally can demon-

strate a significant decrease in daytime crime when truancy intervention programs are put in place. Court, police, and school personnel also realize that they can begin to prevent future truancy by appropriately responding to school absences at the elementary school level. Schools that ignore parental "failure to send" contribute to the development of attitudes that encourage future non-attendance or truancy. Justice system experts can share the insights they learned by doing social history reports and meeting with delinquent youth or criminal adults with educators. They can share the fact that successful students who regularly attend school rarely are the serious and repetitive delinquents in the criminal justice system. Educators who model or expect maximum attendance even for the kindergarten student establish a foundation for success. The sharing of student interns and consulting roles by court staff can assist elementary school administrators and families. Many of the families with truancy problems have legitimate problems that make school attendance difficult. Probation counselors frequently have a solid knowledge of community services and can assist school personnel in directing families to clothing banks, medical services, and other helping professionals that may not be known to the educators. Resources that are beneficial to youth have been shared with the elementary school educators, who have little experience dealing with services more commonly brought in after crisis or family disintegration. Early identification of problems has led to early treatment in some settings. Such interventions might not have occurred without multi-agency collaboration or application of a comprehensive services philosophy.

The early 2000 federal report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being, 2000*, presents a good picture of our nation's youth and families. The profile indicates that 27 percent of our children are in a single-parent household. The overall high school completion rate has recently decreased to 85 percent. This decrease is higher in the Afro-American and Hispanic communities. Teen pregnancy and crime figures have improved in recent years. But poverty, substance abuse, addiction, and hunger remain a reality for millions of children. It is this population

that is most at risk and most likely to benefit from early childhood prevention programs. Criminal justice professionals can play an important role in such projects. Both short-term and long-term benefits can be realized.

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