

A Time for Skepticism*

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Specific research findings are introduced to demonstrate the absence of reliable data supporting claims for the effectiveness of delinquency treatment programs currently in use. Progress in this field will be encouraged if those responsible for treatment programs apply various techniques with a great deal of skepticism, testing their effectiveness systematically and evaluating them objectively. Continued innovation is urged, but cast in the form of careful field experimentation.

ADMINISTRATORS of delinquency prevention and treatment agencies seem now, more than ever, to be searching for alternative programs that will work. Hence it is timely for a student of delinquency to sow the seeds of skepticism among them. Many of the alternatives currently being touted in the literature and at conferences are being claimed "proven effective," already demonstrably successful. I would have these claims greeted with grave doubt. This article is meant to arm those responsible for developing programs against well-meaning but possibly ultimately empty promises.

We need desperately to identify alternatives for delinquency prevention and treatment that will work. We cannot afford to leap from fad to fad, hoping that the next one will solve the problem of delinquency better than the last, which appeared promis-

ing at first but somehow seemed finally to make no difference at all. The costs are immense and the need is critical.

Ambiguous Figures

Let us consider this critical need and, in doing so, provide an illustration of the usefulness of skepticism. The urgency of the problem of juvenile delinquency emerges full force from the statistics: young people are accounting for larger and larger proportions of cleared crimes, even felonies, and more juveniles are running afoul of the law.¹ I do not quarrel with these data; but I am skeptical about their interpretation. Do they mean that America's youth are growing more delinquent? The fact is that the official statistics on juvenile delinquency compiled by police, courts, and institutions are so far from the reality of the actual delinquent behavior of juveniles that they cannot tell us whether our children are becoming more—or less—delinquent. The

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1. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970).

violative behavior of youth has only slight relationship to the official data. The official statistics on juvenile delinquency reflect as much, if not more, the behavior of uniformed policemen, juvenile police officers, court workers, and judges as they do the behavior of the juveniles themselves. It is clear from studies of delinquent behavior, confessed in confidentiality to neutral interviewers by representative samples of American youth, that the perpetrators of only 3 per cent of the total chargeable offenses committed by American youth are known to any law enforcement officer.² Almost half of the male offenders apprehended in one Michigan city were actually less delinquent than most of the boys who were never caught at all.³ And only a small proportion of the most delinquent juveniles ever appear in any record.⁴

Is delinquency increasing? *No one knows*. Public outcry about the lawlessness of our youth is a problematical reaction to what may very well turn out to be a mythical beast. On the other hand, it may be just as well that the public believes delinquency is growing to monstrous proportions, if that is the only basis for public support of remedial programs. For delinquency is a problem, in quality, if not in quantity.

We ought to be concerned about frequent and serious juvenile law-breaking, wherever we find it and whether it is increasing or not. For delinquency is a symptom of trouble, in an individual and in a community.

2. Jay R. Williams and Martin Gold, "From Delinquent Behavior to Official Delinquency," *Social Problems*, Fall 1972, pp. 209-29.

3. Martin Gold, *Delinquent Behavior in an American City* (Belmont, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1970).

4. Williams and Gold, *supra* note 2.

As to its portent for individuals, Lee N. Robins, in her outstanding twenty-year follow-up research of children's agency referrals,⁵ has demonstrated that referral for delinquent behavior is more predictive of adult maladjustment than referral for any other reason. Adults who had been diagnosed as neurotic, psychotic, borderline schizophrenic, etc., as juveniles were no less well integrated into their communities than a comparable group of adults who had never been seen by a children's agency. However, the delinquent children grown up were beset by a plague of troubles—unemployment, criminality, mental illness and hospitalization, and early death by natural and unnatural causes.

It is not clear from Robins' data whether it was the delinquency which signaled future difficulty or the referral which started all the trouble. We cannot ignore the latter possibility—namely, that being identified as a delinquent, referred to a juvenile court or some other children's agency, and treated as a delinquent in one way or another, with whatever good intent, *itself* creates the condition for future maladjustment. The data on this issue are more than disconcerting: they indicate that juveniles who are caught at delinquent behavior by law enforcement officers are more likely to commit further delinquent acts than comparable offenders who are not caught. It is not yet clear what it is about being apprehended that encourages rather than discourages delinquency, but at least two independent studies are remarkably in agreement on this point: whatever forces are set in motion by the apprehension of a juvenile offender, their net effect is to provoke

5. Lee N. Robins, *Deviant Children Grown Up* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1966).

more delinquent behavior in the future than they deter.⁶ And if it is true, as Robins' research suggests, that juvenile delinquency is a harbinger of adult maladjustment, we do neither an individual nor his community any good in the long run by catching him and treating him in the ways we do these things nowadays.

Those who are responsible for delinquency prevention and treatment programs may be convinced that their programs are doing their young clients some good and that they certainly cannot be doing them any harm. But, again, it is wise to be skeptical, for how do we know that?

The best data at hand demonstrate that we have not yet solved the problem of the effective treatment of delinquency. To place this in a historical context, it has not been long since medical science was not advanced enough to cure. It was only at the turn of the century that consulting a physician offered a sick person a better chance of recovery than any old home remedy or nothing at all. What little technology medical science had developed seventy years ago was canceled by the infectious dangers surrounding doctors and hospitals. That, I submit, is where the treatment of delinquency and most other social ills stands today. We are still in the pre-scientific stage. I believe that medical science turned the bright corner when the laboratory and the field setting merged, when the lessons and the methods of scientific research were translated from the laboratory to the hospitals and to the communities. It seems to me that social treatment will not advance until a comparable merger occurs.

6. Gold, *op. cit. supra* note 3; Martin Gold and Jay R. Williams, "The Effect of Getting Caught," *Prospectus: Journal of Law Reform*, December 1969, pp. 1-12.

One Fad:

Why Skepticism Is Needed

An illustration of the current use—and abuse—of science in delinquency research and treatment is Guided Group Interaction. It is cited here—but not because it has received little scientific attention. Quite the contrary. No other specific treatment strategy has been more carefully researched; no other strategy is grounded in more explicit and coherent theory of delinquent etiology.

Guided Group Interaction consists typically of a group of adolescents—from six to a dozen, all of them with delinquent records—meeting from two to five times a week for an hour or so to discuss their behavior. Often one member of the group is put in the "hot seat" and his behavior particularly is subjected to extensive critique by his peers. At other times, problems are discussed more generally. Essential to the process of Guided Group Interaction is that the peer group is given a great deal of real power in the treatment process: to set its own agenda; to put one or another member in the "hot seat"; and to determine when a member is ready, by virtue of his exemplary behavior, to be released from the program, subject only to rare veto by the adult leadership.

Guided Group Interaction has become something of a movement. Since the report of its earliest use with juveniles in New Jersey by McCorkle, Elias, and Bixby,⁷ it has been introduced widely from coast to coast. Traveling troupes of experts have sprung up to train in its use. A literature has developed around it. And even the sites of its employment have

7. Lloyd W. McCorkle, Albert Elias, and F. Lovell Bixby, *The Highfields Story* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958).

tended to adopt a common suffix to their names—so the original Highfields gave rise to Essexfields, Collegefields, and so on.

Several applications of Guided Group Interaction have been subjected to the scrutiny of careful research—the original Highfields study, the program at Provo, the Marshall Plan, and Silverlake⁸ among them. The social scientists and practitioners who dedicated themselves to the development of this treatment strategy are to be commended for their concern and their courage. But it is somewhat curious that the results of the research program have had so little impact on the practice of Guided Group Interaction. For the conclusions of the research are consistent in finding no effect. Whether compared to typical institutionalization in some studies or to probationary services in others, the superior effectiveness of Guided Group Interaction has not yet been demonstrated. Yet we witness agencies all over this country and abroad turning confidently and enthusiastically to this strategy as though it had been proved successful.

What I have just said of Guided Group Interaction might just as well have been said about other treatment programs—individual or group psychotherapy, behavior modification, street-work with gangs, diversion away from The System, recreational programs,

Big Brother or Big Sister programs—except that most of these have not been nearly as thoroughly evaluated. My point is to demonstrate how pre-scientific our practice now is.

Why Skepticism Will Help

The lesson to be drawn here is *not* to stop everything until research identifies the effective programs; if we come to a standstill we are unlikely to develop or identify successful programs. Individuals responsible for the development of programs are key figures to progress in the field; they are in control of the only laboratories in which programs can really be tested. In order for them to play the part required for progress, they must continue to innovate programs of delinquency prevention and treatment. But what is also required of them, paradoxically, is that they do this with *less* dedication than they now show—and greater skepticism. Or, to describe their role more positively, they need to become somewhat less dedicated to the treatment program they happen to be conducting at any one point in time, and more dedicated to discovering whether it is doing anyone any good.

This presents a formidable challenge. It is hard to get on with the difficult job of treating delinquency without a wholehearted belief in the efficacy of the effort. As one who has himself been responsible for the care and treatment of seriously delinquent and disturbed boys and girls, I know that it often takes a deep-seated confidence in one's ultimate success to get over those desperate days which befall anyone in this business. Nevertheless, we must learn to eschew the luxury of utopian visions. We must sustain ourselves with the stuff of dedicated and hard-headed experimenters. We

8. H. Ashley Weeks, *Youthful Offenders at Highfields* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1958); LaMar T. Empey, *Alternatives to Delinquency Treatment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968); Doug Knight, *The Marshall Program II. Amenability to Confrontive Peer Group Therapy* (Sacramento, Calif.: California Youth Authority, 1971); LaMar T. Empey and Steven G. Lubeck, *The Silverlake Experiment* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971).

must be eager to know what does *not* work if we are ever to learn what does.

And I also understand that some administrators must wrestle with a whole other set of considerations which requires at least their *public* dedication to whatever they are doing. Some are involved more or less directly in the politics of delinquency prevention and treatment. They are directly or indirectly accountable to impatient and often irascible publics to whom they must sell every program undertaken. And nothing succeeds like claims of success. Perhaps the hardest thing to sell the public is an honest experiment, with its open admission that we really do not know how it will turn out. Still, the public can be educated to the need for experimentation. After all, people have come not only to expect but to demand that medical treatments be proved. We need to have the courage of our skeptical convictions in the social area and to instill it in our various publics.

At minimum, I urge those who are considering alternative programs to question whether they have been subjected to careful scientific study and, if so, to inquire of the methods and the results. For example, were comparable control groups also studied or did the program assure its own success by selecting clients who in all likelihood would have done well if simply left alone? Who were counted as successes and failures? Did the dropouts

from the program count against it? What kinds of data were used to determine whether delinquency went up or down?

But to ascertain simply that a program works is a minimum requirement. That knowledge is hardly enough to make the program adoptable elsewhere. It is important to ask *why* it worked. What is it about that program that prevented further delinquent behavior? Why should doing whatever was done affect delinquency? What new processes, social or psychological, are supposed to be set in motion by the program that may be relevant to delinquency? And were these processes indeed set in motion? In short, what is the theory behind the program? And only when the theory is clear, and the way the program implements that theory is made explicit, can that program be adapted knowledgeably to some other setting.

Such provocative questions will encourage, I hope, a confrontation with the realities of today's practice. What is needed is an unflinching look into the state of things as they are. Love is not enough; dedication is not enough; good intentions are not enough; even plausible but untried theory is not enough. I submit that we must now invoke sharp intelligence, a new kind of courage—courage to bolster a *lack* of conviction—and an ample dose of skepticism.