Special Issue: Preventive Intervention Research Centers

Prevention-Centered Science in Mental Health

Doreen Spilton Koretz
The National Institute of Mental Health

Provides an overview of the Preventive Intervention Research Center (PIRC) Program, and an introduction to the nine papers of a special issue of AJCP. Discusses major problems faced by prevention researchers and ways in which the PIRCs are structured to address some of these problems. Highlights the importance of rigorous prevention experiments as tests of theory, and therefore as critical components of the scientific continuum.

This special issue of the American Journal of Community Psychology comprises nine articles that have been generated by investigators from the Preventive Intervention Research Centers (PIRCs), a program funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) since 1982. The four centers represented in this issue—at Johns Hopkins University (PIRC for Early Risk Behaviors, Sheppard Kellam, P.I.), the University of Michigan (Michigan PIRC on Work and Work Transitions, Richard Price, P.I.), Arizona State University (PIRC for Children in High Stress Environments, Irwin Sandler, P.I.), and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (PIRC for Child Health/Physically Ill Children, Ruth Stein, P.I.)—have been in operation since the early 1980s. In the past year, a new center, at the Oregon Social

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1The opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the support or endorsement of the National Institute of Mental Health; the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration; or the Public Health Service.

2All correspondence should be sent to Doreen Spilton Koretz, The National Institute of Mental Health, Prevention Research Branch, 5600 Fishers Ln., Rockville, Maryland 20857.
Learning Center (PIRC for Conduct Disorders, John Reid, P.I.) has been started, bringing the total number of PIRCs to five.

Although small in number, these centers have taken on increasing importance in the field of preventive intervention research, and, as the papers that follow reveal, the work generated by them now represents some of the most exciting and innovative directions in prevention science, with implications for other areas of mental health research.

The purpose of this overview is to provide a context for the following papers. To do this, it is important to begin with a brief description of the PIRC program—to describe the purpose of these centers and what the NIMH hoped to accomplish through this funding mechanism. This description sets the stage for the rest of the overview, which attempts to provide an integrating framework for the individual papers of the special issue.

THE PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION RESEARCH CENTER PROGRAM

The goal of the PIRC program is to enrich and develop psychopathology prevention and mental health promotion research through the funding of centers of excellence that could give high quality multidisciplinary focus to the problems researched at each site, and provide adequate continuity between basic and intervention studies. PIRCs were developed, in part, in response to several major problems faced by prevention researchers: (a) the growing recognition that scientifically rigorous prevention research requires knowledge from many mental health fields (e.g., epidemiology, psychiatry, clinical, community, social and developmental psychology, biostatistics), (b) the logistical and methodological problems involved in conducting increasingly large field experiments with at-risk but not yet "ill" populations (including issues of outcome definition, risk identification, participant selection and attrition, long-term cooperation of service delivery systems, and implementation fidelity), (c) the existence of a relatively small community of psychopathology-focused prevention researchers, covering a broad range of approaches, and (d) the relative "youth" of the research base and paucity of well-articulated theory focused on the prevention of psychopathology. PIRCs are expected to address some of these problems by providing a critical mass of experienced scientists from relevant disciplines who can interact in an ongoing fashion around a set of problem-focused studies, and who have strong understanding of the logistical, political, and scientific complexities of field experimentation.

The key component of a PIRC is its research program, which is aimed at the prevention of specific disorders and dysfunctions and related aspects