Evaluation of a Community-Based Behavior Modification Program for Prevention of Delinquency: The Failure of Success

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ABSTRACT: A community-based, residential treatment program for predelinquents is examined. The immediate efficacy of its behavior-modification techniques is verified. However, follow-up results, including comparisons with a matched control group, indicate the failure of the program to produce desirable social outcomes for discharged youth. Questions concerning the generalizability and the relevance of residential treatment results to discharge settings are raised. The need for innovative programs dealing with the social variables affecting youth labeled "delinquent" is stressed.

In recent years psychologists have become aware of the fact that treatment programs dealing with important social problems—for example, mental illness, juvenile delinquency—are more successful in controlling behavior in institutional settings than in preventing recidivism. Although many programs show desired behavior change within the institution, once released, former residents tend to return to the institution. The institutional programs have failed to promote success in community living or to improve the ways in which discharged patients are treated by the community.

It also appears that what happens outside of the institution, rather than in the institution or in the intrapsychic processes of the patients, is the largest determinant of recidivism (Anthony, Buell, Sharratt, & Althoff, 1972). Fair-weather, Sanders, Cressler, and Maynard (1969), for example, found that whereas chronic patients placed in a supportive social environment maintained themselves significantly more than nonsupported mental patients who had similarly progressed through an institutional treatment program, there were not intrapsychic or psychological "well-being" differences between the two groups. Similarly, Ellsworth, Foster, Childers, Arthur, and Kroeke (1968), and Rappaport, Chinsky, and Cowen (1971) note that the number of patients discharged from a treatment program is more a function of discharge policy than a measure of program effectiveness.

A recent comprehensive review of behavior-modification treatment for delinquents (Davidson & Seidman, 1974) concluded that although many studies

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find behavior-modification techniques to be successful in changing specific targeted behaviors, the generalizability of effects and consequently their utility in prevention of recidivism remains in question. To date there have been few studies of behavior-modification programs for delinquents that have reported follow-up comparisons with a control group of similar youth.

The investigation presented here examined the outcome of a delinquency prevention program that combined two promising intervention approaches. First, the intervention was carried out in a community-based residential setting. The program was designed to provide a community-based alternative to long-term institutional treatment (Empey, 1967). The interventions carried out in such community-based operations involve not only targeting the youth, per se, for change, but also focusing on those social systems already important in the child's life (Goldenberg, 1971; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969). Community-based programs are generally preferred to traditional institutional approaches due to their smaller size, their availability to natural social resources, and their usually briefer length of treatment.

The second program characteristic was the use of behavioral techniques based on the principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1969). Procedures adapted for the program included individualized and group contingencies in a small group home setting (Phillips, 1968; Phillips, Phillips, Fixsen, & Wolf, 1971; Fixsen, Phillips, & Wolf, 1973); modeling to improve social skills (Sarason, 1968; Sarason & Ganzer, 1973); shaping of interview attendance and content focusing on reduction of illegal activity (Schwitzgebel, 1964, 1967, 1969); and shaping interpersonal reciprocity through the use of behavioral contracts (Stuart, 1971).

Within this dual conceptual and technical framework, the application of behavioral principles and the community-based intervention model, the CRISIS Care Center, in Danville, Illinois, was established in late 1970. The program provided short-term residential treatment for predelinquent or behavior problem youth aged 7 to 17 years.

This investigation examines the efficacy of the techniques used to shape and maintain desired performances and evaluates the generalization of such changes from the treatment setting to natural settings.

IN-PROGRAM RESULTS

Multiple evaluations of the efficacy of the in-house behavior modification program were carried out throughout the course of the 18 months (September, 1971 to April, 1973) covered by this paper. As in most behavioral programs, individual programming—complete with observationally based, targeted behaviors—ongoing feedback, and adjustment of contingencies where necessary, provided the basis for operating the residential treatment component of the CRISIS Care Center. Although several individuals analyses could be presented, such would be somewhat beside the thrust of this paper and have been detailed elsewhere (Emshoff, Redd, & Davidson, 1974). Rather, a description of the program will outline its general success,