

A Practical Approach to Evaluating and Improving Juvenile Justice Programs

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A B S T R A C T

For more than a decade, the juvenile justice field in the United States has been dominated by the seventh "moral panic" over juvenile delinquency. This panic led to an overreaction to juvenile delinquency by legislators and juvenile justice officials. The main consequence is a "crisis of overload" in many state and local juvenile justice systems across the country. Tools are available to help juvenile courts effectively manage the overload of court clients. Most important, a new method has been developed for evaluating existing programs against research-based standards that have been synthesized from juvenile justice program evaluations. This tool enables states and localities to take a practical approach to improving juvenile justice system programs.

adults. Moreover, a general "epidemic" of juvenile violence did not occur (Howell, 2003b, pp. 1-23). Aside from homicides involving handguns, most of the increase in reported juvenile violence was in nonserious offenses, and even these increases were

not substantiated in more reliable victimization surveys and self-reported measures of delinquency. Furthermore, the dramatic increase in juvenile violence that was forecast for the late 1990s and well into the new millennium did not materialize.

Nevertheless, the "get tough on juveniles" movement grew along with a penchant among policy makers for "quick fixes," piecemeal solutions that were stimulated by the so-called "epidemic" of juvenile violence. The movement was fueled by inflammatory rhetoric concerning the "superpredator" image of juveniles (DiIulio, 1995a), dire predictions of a second "wave" of juvenile violence (DiIulio, 1995b; Fox, 1996) that never materialized, and other myths about juvenile violence and the juve-

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Reported juvenile arrests for violent crimes—particularly homicides—increased sharply beginning in the latter part of the 1980s, and the seventh "moral panic" over juvenile delinquency in the United States was in full bloom by the early 1990s (Howell, 2003b, pp. 25-40). The term "moral panic" (Cohen, 1980) refers to circumstances in which "society suddenly defines a group of people as a major threat to values and ways of life in a way that is disproportionate to the objective danger posed by the group" (Lane, 2002, p. 464). Stated simply, moral crusaders in a society create moral panics to stigmatize as evil the persons or actions they find offensive. The previous six moral panics over juvenile delinquency occurred in the 1920s and again around 1932, 1946, 1954, 1964, and 1977 (Bernard, 1992, pp. 31-37).¹

The media and some outspoken criminologists overlooked the fact that increased arrests occurred across the board and were actually greater among young

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nile justice system's presumed failure (Howell, 2003b, pp. 15-24). Rehabilitation programs often were abandoned, while boot camps, "Scared Straight" programs, detention centers, and juvenile reformatories increasingly populated the nation's landscape. In addition, growing numbers of juveniles were removed from the juvenile justice system altogether and transferred to the adult criminal justice system (Howell, 2003b, pp. 148-172).

The seventh "moral panic" over juvenile delinquency had devastating consequences for juveniles and the juvenile justice system (JJS). By the end of the 1990s, every state had enacted laws that made their juvenile justice systems more punitive or made it easier to transfer juveniles to the criminal justice system. The changes in many states' juvenile codes:

- Brought more young and minor offenders into the JJS;
- Designated larger proportions of juveniles as serious and violent offenders, resulting in the incarceration of more juveniles in detention centers, juvenile corrections facilities, and adult jails and prisons;
- Extended periods of confinement in juvenile correctional facilities;
- Expanded the lists of crimes and lowered the ages at which juvenile offenders could be transferred to the criminal justice system; and
- Excluded more juvenile offenders from juvenile court jurisdiction.

Juvenile offense rates began dropping before most of the punitive measures had time to take hold. Both the total numbers and rates of violent crime juvenile arrests have dropped for seven consecutive years since 1994, bringing these rates to their lowest levels in 20 years (Butts & Travis, 2002; Snyder, 2003). Homicides by juveniles have plummeted 71% since 1993, to a level below the 1980 rate. However, while the juvenile crime rate continues to fall, the punishment trends that followed the beginning of the drop in offense rates continue to rise.

As a result, increasing numbers of minor juvenile offenders have been brought into the JJS. From 1990 to 1999, juvenile arrests for violent offenses *decreased* by 55% and juvenile arrests for serious property offenses *decreased* by 23% (Snyder, 2000). Nevertheless, during approximately the same period, the total number of referrals to juvenile court *increased* by 44% (Sickmund, 2003). The largest proportional increases were for drug

law violations and simple assault, not the most serious and violent offenses. Yet, from 1989 through 1998, the number of cases in which juvenile courts ordered adjudicated delinquents to be placed in residential facilities *increased* 41% (Sickmund, 2003). In 1995, nearly two-thirds of incarcerated juveniles were in overcrowded detention centers (Wordes & Jones, 1998), and more than 70% of juveniles locked up in training schools were held in overcrowded facilities (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Minority youths are most severely affected by these practices (Males & Macallair, 2000).

As a result of "get tough" laws that bring more minor offenders into the JJS and hold more serious and violent offenders longer, many state and local systems are in a crisis of overload. The extremely costly and largely ineffective child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice system residential facilities are all overloaded (Howell, 2003b; Lerman, 2002). Both public and private agencies are over-reliant on residential care. This crisis in many state and local JJSs has strained juvenile court and correctional resources, exacerbated by recent state budget shortfalls that often have meant cuts in JJS budgets.

Ineffective Punitive Responses

The common response to a presumed delinquency crisis is to increase punishment options. Before the moral panic reached its zenith, the major federal juvenile justice program was the Title V delinquency prevention program. Currently, the major program is the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant Program (Andrews & Marble, 2003). Accountability has become a euphemism for "deserved" punishment (e.g., just deserts). Many federal and state programs emphasize "holding juveniles accountable" (Griffin, 1999). Unfortunately, the more punitive approaches are not effective, and some of them (e.g., shock incarceration, "Scared Straight," and boot camps) may actually increase antisocial behavior and increase recidivism. "When punishment is inappropriately applied, several negative consequences can occur, such as producing unwanted emotional reactions, aggression, or withdrawal—or an increase in the behavior that is punished" (Gendreau, 1996, p. 129).

Sanctions provide only the context for service delivery; it is the intervention within the treatment setting that has the actual power to produce change in offenders, because treatment measures are needed to address the multiple underlying community, family, school, peer

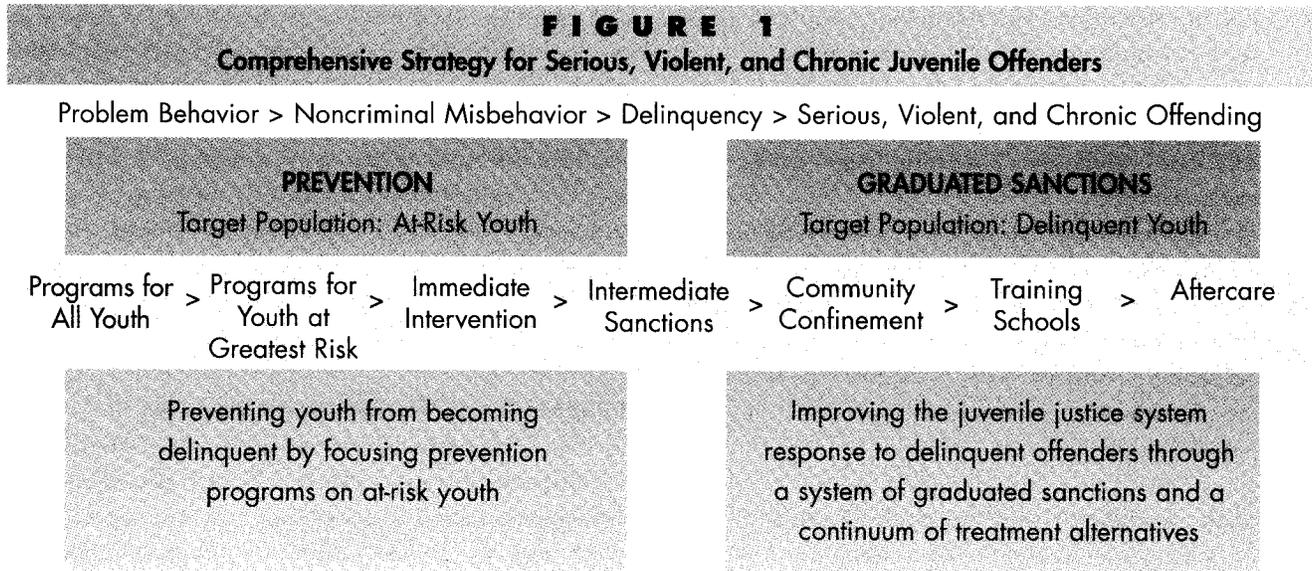


Figure 1. Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders
Source: Wilson & Howell, 1993, p. 25.

group, and individual problems. Along with offense history, these four factors are the major predictors of recidivism (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002).

The Comprehensive Strategy

As a result of the nation's concern over juvenile crime, the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders (Wilson & Howell, 1993) was developed at the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the early 1990s. The OJJDP review found basis for optimism that serious and violent juvenile delinquency could be prevented and controlled, using a balanced approach of prevention, rehabilitation, and control measures. The Comprehensive Strategy thus attempted to strike a balance between calls for more punishment of juvenile offenders on the one hand, and the need for prevention and treatment on the other.

The Comprehensive Strategy Framework

The Comprehensive Strategy is a two-tiered system for responding proactively to juvenile delinquency (see Figure 1). The first tier relies on delinquency prevention, youth development, and early intervention programs to prevent delinquency and reduce the likelihood of delinquent career development among children who display early problem behaviors. If these first tier efforts fail, then the formal juvenile justice system, the second tier, needs to make proactive responses to juvenile delin-

quency by addressing the risk factors for recidivism and associated treatment needs of delinquents, particularly those with a high likelihood of becoming serious, violent, and chronic offenders. A continuum of sanctions and services is needed that parallels offender careers, beginning with prevention and early intervention in pre- and delinquent careers, and then JJS intervention using graduated sanctions linked with a continuum of rehabilitation interventions. This continuum can be organized to prevent further development of offender careers toward serious, violent, chronic offending.

This article focuses on the graduated sanctions component of the Comprehensive Strategy. Graduated sanctions refers to the continuum of disposition options that JJS officials have at their disposal (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002). Graduated sanctions serve two main purposes. First, they contribute to public safety in the short term by restricting offenders' freedom to commit new offenses. Second, they provide a structured context that gives treatment a chance to work. To accomplish these twin goals, the ideal graduated sanctions system should provide five levels of sanctions, first stepping offenders up from least to most restrictive sanctions, culminating in secure correctional confinement; then stepping them down to least restrictive options in an aftercare format (Wilson & Howell, 1993):

1. Immediate intervention with first-time delinquent offenders (misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies)

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- and nonserious repeat offenders (examples include teen court, diversion, and regular probation);
2. Intermediate sanctions for first-time serious or violent offenders, and also chronic and serious/violent offenders (intensive probation supervision is a main example);
 3. Community confinement (secure and non-secure residential community-based programs are examples);
 4. Secure corrections for the most serious, violent, chronic offenders (i.e., training schools);
 5. Aftercare (consisting of a continuum of court-based, step-down program options that culminate in discharge).

These gradations—and the sublevels that can be crafted within them—form a continuum of sanctions that should be paralleled by a continuum of treatment options, including an array of referral and disposition resources for law enforcement, juvenile courts, and juvenile corrections officials. The efficacy of graduated sanctions for enhancing the effectiveness of programs is suggested in a number of studies, and detailed descriptions of effective graduated sanctions systems are available (Howell, 2003b, pp. 205-207). Numerous effective treatment options that can be linked with graduated sanctions in this component of the Comprehensive Strategy are also accessible (see Howell, 2003b, pp. 194-223); however, a potentially more productive way of ensuring that services are effective is discussed below.

As offenders progress in the graduated sanctions system, linked rehabilitation programs must become more structured and intensive to deal effectively with the intractable problems that more difficult and dangerous offenders present, while reserving secure confinement for the much smaller number of serious, chronic, and violent juvenile offenders. Multiple-problem youth—those experiencing a combination of mental health and school problems along with drug use and personal victimization—are at greatest risk for continued and escalating offending (Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry, & Cothorn, 2000).

Comprehensive Strategy Linchpins

The Comprehensive Strategy is activated by two activities that are considered “linchpins” for effective implementation. First, communities must conduct a comprehensive assessment of risk and protective factors for delinquency in their specific jurisdictions

and target the most prevalent risk factors with prevention programs. Second, JJS agencies must assess their delinquent populations for risk and treatment needs and strengths, to classify and position offenders within a structured system of graduated sanctions that best protect the public. Offenders can then be properly placed in existing, expanded, and newly developed program interventions that are developmentally appropriate and match the offenders’ treatment needs and individual/family strengths.

Comprehensive Strategy Results

The Comprehensive Strategy is a “diffusion” initiative (Howell, 2003a)—members of the juvenile justice, delinquency prevention, and other human services and child serving agencies learn about, make decisions about, and act on its ideas and practices. Local ownership of programs and strategies is imperative for optimal system effectiveness. Hence each community, city, or state must develop its own strategic plan, using the Comprehensive Strategy’s framework and tools.

A number of states and local communities have effectively implemented the Comprehensive Strategy (see Howell, 2003b, pp. 293-300). The 8% Early Intervention Program in Orange County, Calif. (also called the 8% Solution), and the San Diego County Breaking Cycles program are two current examples of effective graduated sanctions systems linked with program continuums (Howell, 2003b, pp. 205-207). Local professionals developed both of these programs. Other states and localities began implementing the Comprehensive Strategy later and have not yet been evaluated. For example, Ohio is implementing it in five counties. The Ohio initiative has brought together juvenile courts, school officials, law enforcement, child caring agencies, faith-based organizations, families, and other public and private partners to achieve a common goal—preventing and reducing delinquency. County plans have been developed to reduce the risk factors associated with delinquency, violence, and other adolescent problem behaviors, including substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and school dropout. One of the juvenile courts that implemented graduated sanctions is in Lucas County and under the direction of National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges President James A. Ray. Risk and needs assessment and reassessment instruments are used to identify potential recidivists and sort the probation population into high, regular, and low risk

groups. Low risk offenders are diverted. This system enables the court to allocate resources accordingly to enhance the effectiveness of the court's continuum of sanctions and programs (Griffin & Torbet, 2002).²

Practical Tools for Better Management of Delinquent Populations

Available tools can help juvenile courts and correctional agencies more effectively manage their clients under the graduated sanctions component of the Comprehensive Strategy. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Juvenile Sanctions Center (2002) makes these "structured decision-making" tools available (also see Howell & Lipsey, in press). Use of three structured decision-making tools—risk assessment, youth and family needs/strengths assessment, and a disposition matrix—enable court and correctional program managers to step offenders up the graduated sanctions levels as offender careers progress and to step them down as delinquency decreases.

Because official records contain an incomplete picture of offenders' delinquent histories, risk assessment instruments should be used to estimate the level of sanctions that is needed to protect the public. A validated risk assessment instrument can identify a group of high-risk youths who are at least three times more likely to re-offend than youths classified as low risk (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002).³ Such risk assessment instruments have been validated on at least eight state juvenile populations and in other studies (Howell, 2003b). In addition, risk assessment instruments have recently been validated for several serious, violent, and chronic offender subgroups, including felony recidivists (Barnoski, 1998), first-time referrals versus second- and third-time referrals (LeCroy, Krysik, & Palumbo, 1998), and potential chronic offenders among second-time offenders (Smith & Aloisi, 1999). Three risk assessment instruments have been validated for successful classification of offenders based on their likelihood of recidivating with violent offenses—in Maryland (Wiebush, Johnson, & Wagner, 1997), Missouri (Johnson, Wagner, & Matthews, 2001), and Virginia (Wiebush, Wagner, & Erlich, 1999). In Missouri, high-risk youths had a subsequent violent court referral rate six times greater than that of low-risk youths (Johnson et al., 2001). A model risk assessment instrument is available (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002, p. 83), but it needs to be validated in each locality because research shows some varia-

tion in the strength of predictors by geographical area.

Youth and family needs/strengths assessments are used to determine offenders' treatment needs as well as personal and family strengths. A model youth and family needs/strengths assessment instrument is available (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002, pp. 90-93). Needs/strengths assessments should be used in tandem with risk assessments to place offenders in appropriate supervision levels, and in appropriate program interventions within each supervision level, using a disposition matrix that organizes sanctions and program interventions by risk level and offense severity (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002, p. 87). These practical tools will help communities design a fair, consistent, cost-effective system. The next step involves making the programs in use more effective.

A Practical Approach to Improving Treatment and Rehabilitation Programs

Attempts to apply knowledge developed through research about effective programs to program practice have generally taken one of three approaches. Attempting to replicate "model programs" is currently the most popular approach. In this strategy, local programs are designed to emulate programs that have shown positive results in research and demonstration (R&D) experiments.⁴ This requires that the program be well defined and documented and that the local program implements it with fidelity. The OJJDP Blueprints project uses the model program approach (Mihalic, Irwin, Elliott, Fagan, & Hansen, 2001) and a similar initiative is underway statewide in Washington (Aos, Phipps, Barnoski, & Lieb, 2001). Outcomes of the OJJDP Blueprints project have not been reported, and the experience of Washington State with model programs has been uneven. The Washington State Legislature commissioned the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to identify effective, cost-beneficial juvenile rehabilitation programs (Aos et al., 2001) and mandated that localities implement one or more of the three identified in that study. The WSIPP evaluations of the local implementations of these programs to date suggest that their net effects across sites are variable because of inconsistent and, often, poor implementation (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2002). Even if well implemented and effective, of course, a single program model will do little to strengthen the overall continuum of program options.

A second strategy for applying research results to program practice is to directly evaluate the effectiveness of each existing program. For delinquency prevention and intervention programs, this means conducting a credible assessment of the impact of the program on the probability of subsequent offending by the youths who participate. In this approach, effective programs are maintained and supported while ineffective programs are eliminated or revamped and evaluated again. By organizing program support and services toward the achievement of objectively demonstrated positive outcomes, this approach has considerable potential to generate effective practice. However, conducting regular, valid outcome evaluations for each individual program would require a great deal of research with its associated high costs. That level of research makes this option so expensive that it would be cost-prohibitive in all but the most restricted contexts. In most states, funding has been provided for, at best, evaluation of only a few selected programs.

A third approach involves extracting program principles or guidelines for effective interventions from research, especially previous evaluation of relevant programs, and applying them to program practice. This strategy does not require that each program replicate all aspects of an effective R&D program with consistent high fidelity or that regular outcome evaluation be undertaken to provide feedback on the effectiveness of each program. However, it does require a sufficient body of evaluation research and a valid identification of the features that differentiate effective programs from ineffective ones. The key assumption of this approach is that incorporation of a suitable selection of those features into the practice of routine programs will ensure their effectiveness.

Instituting these "best practices"—also called "evidence-based practices," or "research-based practices"—is the direction in which most human service programs appear to be moving. What is put forward as a "best practice," however, varies considerably with regard to just what constitutes the respective practice and how well it is anchored in research evidence. The linkage is often loose and few claims of evidence-based practice are supported by convincing documentation of the relevant evidence and the procedures by which practice guidelines are derived from it.

In this article, we describe a systematic approach to extracting practice guidelines from the large body of out-

come research on delinquency programs and using them to evaluate and improve routine programs spanning the continuum from prevention to treatment. This endeavor is organized in support of the Comprehensive Strategy framework described earlier, with the overall objective of using its framework for diffusing research into best practice (Howell, 2003a). Recent research on the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs is summarized first, followed by a description of how that research is being used to characterize effective program practice in ways that allow ready comparison with actual program practice and provide guidance for improvement.

What Works

In contrast to the previous era, studies of the relative effectiveness of juvenile justice programs since the early 1980s have generally been positive. The program evaluation base has expanded significantly in recent decades, providing a deeper and more detailed body of empirical evidence about the effects of rehabilitative programs for juvenile offenders. In addition, the emergence of the quantitative technique of meta-analysis has allowed researchers to analyze and synthesize a large volume of program evaluation results in a comprehensive manner, adding confidence to generalizations about program outcomes.

Meta-analysis is a quantitative technique for coding, analyzing, and summarizing research evidence that was originally developed in the field of education. Put simply, meta-analysis uses statistical procedures to synthesize results and compare clusters of studies on a given topic. The technique enables meta-analysts to examine a wider range of program evaluations in a more systematic manner than is possible in conventional program-by-program reviews. Equally important, meta-analysis results can be communicated to practitioners in a user-friendly format, as will be seen in this article. This procedure is now widely accepted "as a sophisticated way to extract, analyze, and summarize the empirical findings of a collection of related research studies" (Lipsey, 1999b, p. 616).

More than a dozen meta-analyses have shown the positive effects of rehabilitative programs on recidivism, especially for juvenile offenders (for a listing, see Lipsey, 1999b, pp. 613-614). "It is no exaggeration to say that meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of rehabilitative programming has reversed the [negative] conclusion of the prior generation of [program-by-program]

reviews on this topic" (Lipsey, 1999b, p. 614). Lipsey's meta-analyses have been instrumental in debunking the "nothing works" conclusion with respect to juvenile rehabilitation program interventions and the myth that juvenile courts are not effective (Howell, 2003b, pp. 197-199).

Lipsey's (1992, 1995) initial meta-analysis of juvenile justice program evaluations found that juveniles in treatment groups have recidivism rates about 10% lower than untreated juveniles. The best interventions produced nearly 40% reductions in recidivism rates and similar improvements in other outcomes. The most effective interventions typically focused on changing overt behavior through structured training or cognitive-behavioral interventions designed to improve social development skills—interpersonal relations, self-control, school achievement, and specific job skills. Program effects are consistently stronger for structured, behavioral, and/or skill-building interventions than for insight-oriented approaches such as casework, counseling, and group therapy (Lipsey, 1995). Nevertheless, the myth of overall failure of juvenile justice programs continues to appear in juvenile justice literature (Feld, 1998a, 1998b; Hsia & Beyer, 2000; Schwartz, Weiner, & Enosh, 1998).

After completing his study, Lipsey (1995) observed that:

It is no longer constructive for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to argue about whether delinquency treatment and related rehabilitative approaches "work," as if that were a question that could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." As a generality, treatment clearly works. We must get on with the business of developing and identifying the treatment models that will be most effective and providing them to the juveniles they will benefit (p. 78).

Lipsey's next meta-analysis focused on program interventions for serious and violent offenders (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). Lipsey and Wilson classified program types according to their usage for institutionalized and noninstitutionalized juvenile offenders. Interpersonal skills training proved very effective in either setting. Otherwise, there were important differences in the kinds of effective interventions in the respective settings. Three other types of treatment showed the most positive effects in noninstitutionalized offenders: indi-

vidual counseling, and behavioral interventions, followed closely by multiple services (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998, p. 332). In contrast, teaching family homes, behavioral programs, community-residential interventions, and multiple services showed the most positive effects in institutionalized offenders—along with interpersonal skills training. However, Lipsey and Wilson caution that "many more studies of intervention with institutionalized serious offenders will be needed before strong conclusions can be reached" because few of these programs have been evaluated (1998, p. 328).

Interestingly, intervention effects do not differ greatly according to general characteristics of offenders receiving treatment, including gender, age, ethnic mix, and aggressive history (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998; Wilson, Lipsey, & Soydan, 2003). The issue of program effectiveness with serious and violent juvenile offenders is particularly worth noting. If anything, juvenile justice programs may be slightly more effective with serious and violent offenders than with others (Lipsey, 1999a; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998), which contradicts the myth that JJS programs are not effective with them (see Howell, 2003b, p. 200). In fact, juvenile courts arguably are the most effective of all the components of the United States criminal justice and crime control apparatus (Howell, 2003b), and community-based JJS programs are far more cost-beneficial than institution-based treatment (Aos et al., 2001; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998).

The overwhelming majority of programs *developed by JJS practitioners* reduce recidivism—at least slightly—and about one-quarter produce very meaningful reductions. This is perhaps a startling statement to some readers. It is based in research, specifically on a meta-analysis of 196 evaluations of "real" or "practical" juvenile justice system programs (routinely provided in institutional and community contexts) (Lipsey, 1999b). Most of these are juvenile court programs, such as many of those described in an earlier National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges assessment of promising programs (Montgomery et al., 1994). Lipsey's analysis revealed that only 7% of the practical programs failed to reduce recidivism. Although the largest number of them (50%) reduced recidivism only slightly (about 2%), 17% of them produced large recidivism reductions. Programs that had two or more of the favorable characteristics shown in the meta-analysis to be associated with effective programs produced statistically significant reductions in recidivism. In short, the more favorable charac-

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teristics a practical program has, the more it reduces recidivism. This discovery increased Lipsey's optimism that practical programs can be made more effective, even for serious and violent offenders, and that it might be possible to engage practitioners directly in improving existing programs to conform more closely to the characteristics of the most effective evaluated programs.

A Practical Approach to Improving JJS Programs

The "best practices" concept is not necessarily a set of program models to be emulated. Lipsey's recent meta-analysis work has shown that programs typically represent various distinct services combined in a myriad of different configurations (Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology [CERM], 2002). The average juvenile justice program reported in evaluation research has 5.5 service elements. Thus, from a practical standpoint, efforts to improve juvenile treatment and rehabilitation programs necessarily must focus on developing effective combinations of services and service delivery characteristics. "Best practices," therefore, refers to a differentiated set of program elements, many combinations of which are associated with positive outcomes (Lipsey, 1992, 1995; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998, 2000). The four major features of effective juvenile delinquency treatment programs identified in Lipsey's most recent meta-analysis (CERM, 2002) are:

- Primary services—the effectiveness of the main service focus of a program, independent of its use with another intervention;
- Supplemental services—adding another service component to the primary service may, but often does not, increase its effectiveness;
- Service delivery—the amount and quality of service provided, as indicated in service frequency, program duration, and extent of implementation; and
- Characteristics of the juvenile clients—some programs are more effective for high-risk juveniles than low-risk offenders and vice versa; others are more effective for older or younger offenders.

In sum, the major features of effective programs are the primary intervention that is used within the program, provision of supplementary services that enhance the effectiveness of the primary intervention, the

amount of services that the client receives, and the characteristics of the clients who receive them. Collectively, these features tell us much about what works best for whom, and some of the circumstances in which interventions work best.

Based on Lipsey's meta-analyses, the following are the most effective primary services in delinquency prevention and JJS programs, in descending order of effectiveness (CERM, 2002):

- Interpersonal skills training
- Behavioral management
- Cognitive-behavioral
- Parent/family training or counseling
- Mentoring
- Drug/health education
- Individual counseling
- Group counseling
- Restitution
- Academic enhancement
- Intensive supervision
- Multimodal (e.g., service brokerage, case management)
- Employment training

A Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol

Taking the approach described above, we have designed a prototype instrument, the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP), which itemizes the characteristics of effective programs (Lipsey, Howell, & Tidd, 2002). This instrument consists of a rating scheme that assigns points to specific program characteristics according to their relationship to recidivism outcomes in the available research. Different ratings and point allocations are defined for different programs, classified according to the primary service they provide.

Figure 2 shows an SPEP form for rating a program with family counseling services for court supervised delinquents.⁵ Because family counseling is a very effective service by itself (i.e., it produces above average reductions in recidivism), it is worth 60 points as a stand-alone intervention.⁶ Programs can earn extra points, up to a total of 100, if they have other features of the most effective family counseling programs that have been evaluated.⁷ The remaining three SPEP sections allocate a maximum of 40 additional points, according to the incre-

FIGURE 2 Court Delinquency Supervision Programs

FAMILY COUNSELING		POINTS
[Family counseling, family systems intervention, functional family therapy, family crisis counseling; involves the juvenile and parent(s) or entire family.]		60
Typical programs of this type are effective, and above average		
Supplementary Services (check the one most applicable) [10 max]		
<input type="checkbox"/> Parent training [10 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual counseling [2 pts]	
<input type="checkbox"/> Drug/alcohol counseling [6 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> None of these [0 pts]	
<input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring [4 pts]		
Duration of Service (check one) [9 max]		
% of Juveniles with 15 weeks or more:		
<input type="checkbox"/> None [0 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> 67% [6 pts]	
<input type="checkbox"/> 33% [3 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> 100% [9 pts]	
Face-to-Face Contact Days (check one) [12 max]		
% of Juveniles with over 31 contact days:		
<input type="checkbox"/> None [0 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> 67% [8 pts]	
<input type="checkbox"/> 33% [4 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> 100% [12 pts]	
Risk Level for Majority of Juveniles (check one) [4 max]		
<input type="checkbox"/> Lower risk [2 pts]		
<input type="checkbox"/> Upper risk [4 pts]		
Age of Juveniles (check one) [5 max]		
<input type="checkbox"/> Average 14 years old or under [5 pts]	<input type="checkbox"/> Average 15 years old [2 pts]	
TOTAL POINTS		60

Figure 2. Family Counseling Template in the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol for North Carolina's Juvenile Justice System Programs. Source: A Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol for North Carolina's Juvenile Justice System Programs (p. 16), by M. W. Lipsey, J. C. Howell, & S. T. Tidd, 2002, Nashville, TN: Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology. © 2002 by Vanderbilt University, Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology, and the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

mental reductions in recidivism that can be expected by adding a supplemental service to family counseling (item 2 in the SPEP instrument), providing the optimal amount of service (items 3 and 4), and serving juveniles with the risk level and age for which this intervention works best (items 5 and 6), that is, for youths at different risk levels, and for older versus younger youths. Used as an assessment of a particular JJS program with the designated primary service (family counseling), this process yields a total score that indicates how closely the characteristics of that program match those that constitute best practice according to the research.

Juvenile justice officials can use rating schemes of this sort to assess their existing programs and identify options for improving them. For example, they could opt to add an appropriate supplementary service component (or change the existing supplementary service), arrange to deliver a more optimal amount of service, alter the type of targeted client in order to improve the existing program, or discard a weak primary service in favor of a more effective one.

Although it has not yet been validated with outcome data, this approach holds promise for assisting programs administered or sponsored by JJS practition-

TABLE 1
Recidivism Rates for Juveniles in Programs in the Research Database with Successively More of the SPEP-Recommended Characteristics

COURT DELINQUENCY SUPERVISION PROGRAMS

Condition	Recidivism Rate
Recidivism rates for comparable juveniles not in a program (rounded off value from control groups; predominant metric is police arrest/contact six months after intervention)	.40
Recidivism rate for juveniles in the average supervision program in the SPEP court supervision database	.34
Recidivism rate for juveniles in upper tier program types, but with no supplemental services and otherwise average program characteristics	.32
Upper tier program plus best supplemental service, otherwise average	.28
Upper tier, best supplement, and high-end implementation (duration of service and contact days as advised by the SPEP)	.24
Upper tier, best supplement, high-end implementation, and best fit with juveniles (risk and age as advised by the SPEP)	.21

Source: Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology (2002). OJJDP Project on Effective Delinquency Programs. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt Institute of Public Policy Studies, Center for Evaluation Research and Methodology.

ers to more closely approach the recidivism reductions demonstrated by the most effective programs represented in the research literature. Indeed, Lipsey's meta-analysis of research studies for juvenile court programs suggests that incremental improvements in the average court supervision program can potentially cut recidivism nearly in half (Table 1).

A project is currently underway in North Carolina to implement and test a pilot version of the SPEP that is tailored specifically to programs employed in the state. This statewide continuum-building project entails assessing existing JJS programs against best practices, identifying weak programs, and using knowledge of the characteristics of effective programs to improve them. The first step involved gathering very detailed information on the variety of program services in use across the state. The service components in the North Carolina programs were coded using the same coding scheme as was used in the meta-analysis for the service components of the pro-

grams represented in research studies. Then, programs in the research database with service components that clustered with those of the North Carolina programs were extracted and analyzed to determine the effective features expected to be applicable to the comparable North Carolina programs. This procedure enabled us to develop a version of the SPEP that applies specifically to North Carolina programs (Lipsey et al., 2002).

In the current phase of the North Carolina Project, representatives in pilot counties are being trained in how to assess and improve current prevention and court programs. The collective effect of improving individual programs, of course, is intended to make the entire continuum of prevention, juvenile court, and correctional programs more effective. In the last phase of the North Carolina project, programs will be evaluated to determine if the project team successfully engaged practitioners in changing their programs to conform closely to the advice of the SPEP. Future research will determine

whether the improved programs produced recidivism reductions expected on the basis of the performance of comparable programs in the research literature.

SPEP Limitations

The SPEP is not a blueprint for an entire juvenile justice program. It measures only a few key characteristics related to the delinquency reduction potential of the average program of a given type. Other outcomes in addition to recidivism, such as improved school performance, better family relations, and less drug use, will be important as well and the SPEP is not directed toward improving them. In addition, the SPEP does not provide a treatment plan for individual clients that is responsive to their particular needs and situation. It only creates a framework within which treatment can be planned. Its purpose is only to guide juvenile justice managers toward forms of intervention that have the greatest potential for decreasing overall recidivism levels for general categories of clients. The crafting of detailed treatment plans that are individualized for each juvenile within each intervention program must be left to the respective service professionals.

Summary

The seventh juvenile delinquency "moral panic," the resulting overload of many of the state and local juvenile justice systems, and state budget shortfalls in recent years have left many systems in crisis. The Comprehensive Strategy framework and practical structured decision-making tools that the National Council of Juvenile and

Family Court Judges has made readily available will help juvenile courts and correctional agencies become more efficient and cost-effective by concentrating resources on the highest risk offenders. Use of risk and strength/needs assessment tools to build a continuum of sanctions and parallel program options increases the opportunity for program effectiveness. However, effective program interventions must be used consistently. Improving them requires a concerted effort.

As a result of the detailed examination of program evaluation research provided by meta-analysis, the characteristic features of the most effective juvenile justice programs are now known. The implications of this knowledge for program improvement are clear. It is feasible to evaluate existing interventions against this knowledge base, and then engage local practitioners to improve existing programs so they correspond more closely with "best practices." The receptivity of North Carolina practitioners to this practical approach suggests its considerable potential for improving existing programs to conform to research-based practices.

This practical approach to program improvement also fits nicely with the continuum-building goal of the Comprehensive Strategy framework. North Carolina is currently implementing both the prevention and graduated sanctions components of the Comprehensive Strategy. This continuum-building project that uses the SPEP instrument to evaluate and improve programs should help strengthen both components of the state's Comprehensive Strategy.

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END NOTES

- ¹ Howell (2003b, pp. 25-40) details the factors leading to the seventh moral panic and its consequences for juvenile justice.
- ² See the appendix of Griffin & Torbet (2002) for copies of the Lucas County Juvenile Court instruments.
- ³ It should be noted that risk assessment instruments do not yield infallible predictions in individual cases; they are not a substitute for sound professional judgment (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2002). Their essential function is to enhance professional judgment by providing historical experience with offender recidivism to inform current decisions. Used appropriately, they can improve case decisions.
- ⁴ Research demonstration (R&D) programs are designed specifically to demonstrate the effectiveness of particular interventions. A distinguishing feature of R&D programs is active research team involvement in planning and implementing the program. In addition, R&D programs are typically highly structured around specific and systematically administered treatment protocols. Service providers in such programs are usually well trained in service delivery, and treatments are closely monitored.
- ⁵ Family counseling/therapy is a technique focusing on family interactions/dynamics and their link to delinquent behavior. This type of treatment involves the entire family, but, at a minimum, involves the child and his/her parent(s). This intervention may also include the availability of a trained individual to respond either over the phone or in person to a crisis involving the juvenile and/or his or her family (Lipsey et al., 2002).
- ⁶ Less effective primary interventions are allocated fewer points: 50 for "effective, but average," and 40 points for "effective, but below average" primary interventions. The assigned numerical values represent the added increment of recidivism shown in research. In some cases, the added increment is very small; in others, it is quite substantial.
- ⁷ Only the most effective primary interventions can earn a total of 100 points. Lipsey's meta-analyses provide the basis for dividing the above list of effective interventions into three groups, depending on the relative degree to which they reduce recidivism, on average. "Effective, but average" primary interventions can earn a maximum of 90 points and "effective, but below average" primary interventions can earn a maximum of 80 points. Again, these values represent the relative effectiveness of the primary interventions as revealed in prior studies.

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