

The Influence of Deviant Peers



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The Problem

The old adage, “Bad association spoils useful habits” captures the sentiment that young teens may develop negative behavior from their peers. However, policy-makers do not appear to heed this adage when planning interventions with youth identified as deviant.

The method of aggregating or grouping deviant youth with one another is modeled after group treatment programs used in the mental health field. Following in the footsteps of programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, social policy makers have designed programs where “deviant youth can empathize with each other, learn valuable lessons from each other, and provide real-life interactions for each other.” The rationale for programs like Scared Straight, Boot Camp, and Midnight Basketball is that these programs not only serve to isolate deviant youth, but are also cost effective. While policy and government programs have good intentions, some research indicates that when these practices are implemented within the juvenile justice system, community and housing programs, and education arenas the practices may only exacerbate the problem.

A recent report by Dodge, Dishion, and Landsford (2006) entitled “Deviant Peer Influence in Intervention and Public Policy for Youth” is a comprehensive analysis that examines the effect of peer influence within education, juvenile justice and public community interventions. The primary goal of the article was to analyze whether the “removal of deviant youth from well-adjusted peers and placement with other deviant youth [...] is the wisest policy to take for devi-



Deviancy training occurs when a peer displays antisocial behavior or talks about it and other peers positively reinforce that behavior by smiling or giving verbal approval and high status to the first peer. A youth observes this norm and then engages in similar talk or behavior, which is also reinforced. Soon, the youth is drawn into the peer culture and becomes more deviant (Dishion, p. 4).

The Method

Twenty-five scholars from various backgrounds (economics, psychology, political science, sociology, education, engineering, philosophy, statistics, criminology, policymakers, federal agencies, journalism, and businessmen) met six times over three years to review scientific literature on aggregating deviant peers in public intervention programs. The project consisted of two components:

- A comprehensive review of the negative effects of programs that group deviant peers during interventions in juvenile justice, community housing programs, and education.

- A secondary data investigation that evaluated the outcomes where the panel conducted site visits to intervention programs; administered focus groups with youth, interventionists, and parents; initiated several new empirical studies; and deliberated over the evidence. A new meta-analysis was then completed with recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.

*Dodge, K. A., Dishion, T. J., & Landsford J. E., (2006) . Deviant peer influence in intervention and public policy for youth. *Social Policy Report: Giving Child and Youth Development Knowledge Away*. Volume XX, Number ,I 1-20.

Related Practices in Public Interventions

Juvenile Justice and Deviant Peer Influence

In 2000, 320,000 youth were placed in detention centers with other offending youths. One study (Loughran et al., 2004) reported that instead of appropriating funds to transitional efforts which will reduce the rate of recidivism, 93% (\$4.65 billion out of 5 billion) of funds are allocated for the development of alternative programs (e.g., boot camps, wilderness camps, Scared Straight). These statistics clearly indicate the increasing problem of the spread of deviant behavior and how the juvenile justice system ineffectively responds to the problem by placing deviant youth with other offending youth.

Community and Housing Programs and Deviant Peer Influence

Some community and housing programs show how social policies indirectly lead to high risk youth coming together, increasing their risk for deviant behavior. While there are no reliable figures about the total amount of funds spent on community programs such as Midnight Basketball, what is known is that 3.6 million youth are enrolled in this type of after-school programming. Despite the fact that the intentions of these programs are to keep kids off the streets, often they counter-productively foster settings that are non-structured, less supervised, and serve as a more welcoming environment for youth to just “hang out.” These programs also offer increased opportunities for the youth to commit deviant acts and the “team” atmosphere increases the success of those acts.

Education and Deviant Peer Influence

Removing students with behavioral problems to a setting away from mainstream students as a form of intervention in the education arena is not a new concept. As a matter of fact, in the 1990's school violence became the center of media attention, resulting not only in long-term suspensions, expulsions for students, but also the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1995, and other zero-tolerance initiatives.

During 1998, three million students were suspended and 87,000 expelled. Contrary to achieving the intended result of rehabilitation by removal of deviant youth from their mainstream peers, research shows that it creates an environment for deviant peer influence to worsen. This is largely because students that are suspended are more likely to use their free time to hang out on the streets with similar youth. Furthermore, one study found that the likelihood for deviant behavior increases two-fold for those with a history of suspension.

The removal of these youth from a mainstream environment in order to place them in alternative schools and special education programs are justified by policies that associate low academic achievement with disruptive behavior (e.g., Tracking & No Child Left Behind Act). These group treatment environments “isolate[s] deviant youth from same-age peers and lead[s] retained youth to form associations with other retained youth” (p. 3). More alarming is that this approach is true even in cases where a student received legal consent for learning in a less restrictive environment (Individuals with Disabilities Act).

In summary, nationwide the implementation of alternative schools and group programs not only increased from 39% in 2001 to 54% in 2004 but exceeded the expected demand for the programs. At the state level, the problem of controlling deviant peer groups has become such an epidemic that some states like North Carolina insist that “every school district must develop an alternative school placement option for deviant youth” (p. 4). In fact, it is estimated that out of the 501.3 billion tax dollars set aside by the United States government for alternative schools from 2003-2004, North Carolina spent 15 million (3%) for group programs for deviant youth (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2003).

Deviant Peer Effects and Solutions

Juvenile Justice

After reviewing other studies that investigated the impact and effectiveness of the removal of deviant youth from a mainstream environment to placement with other deviant youth, it has been found that this can have adverse effects. For example, one comprehensive study found that “42% of groups-administered prevention and intervention programs and 22% of group-administered probation interventions yield adverse effects” (p. 11). While it is not clear if deviance training is a factor in the relative decrease in the effectiveness of peer group counseling, researchers have identified possible solutions. An increase of staff to peers ratio, a higher degree of structure, and avoiding placing younger youth with slightly older youth will help minimize opportunities for youth to interact with one another. Furthermore, since long-term placement has been thought to do more harm than good, short term containment is recommended.

Community and Housing Programs

Community programs such as after-school programs are a vital resource for neighborhoods, however, these programs have been known to have adverse effects on participants. For example, when comparing youth in an after school program with those on a waiting list, researchers found that “those who were assigned to the after-school program displayed higher rates of deviant behavior” (e.g., suspensions and disciplinary action) (James-Burdumy et al., 2005). Street gangs can be viewed through the same orientations since they too, are most commonly displaced and organized in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

While housing programs such as after-school activities are a vital and beneficial resource to most communities, changes are necessary in order to avoid negative outcomes that provide unstructured space for youth to just ‘hang out’. One solution is to provide structured programs that center on opportunities for young people to learn job skills and interact with positive role models and in their communities (e.g., Job Corps Program). In addition, community programs should work to attract all types of children rather than high-risk youth. In fact, it has been found that when community programs (e.g., scouts, church activities) integrate high-and low-risk children with non-deviant peers they yield some of the most positive outcomes (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999).

Education

One research project (Jacob & Lefgren, 2003) that compared the rate of violence when school was in session to when school was not in session had startling results. The findings indicated that when school is in session violent crime increases by 28%. This is most likely due to increased interaction between deviant peers and similar youth fostered by school policies. For instance, while attending school, students are placed with other deviant youth in settings such as in-school suspension or classes designed for students on a low academic track. Outside of mainstream school settings, alternative schools also are likely to increase student deviance. In the alternative school system, students are surrounded by other deviant peers of varying degrees. This increases the opportunity for students to influence each others’ negative behavior. These environments may increase the likelihood that the youth will develop a collective identity with peers who have similar experiences. Once these identities are established, students may be less likely to correct negative behavior, thus fulfilling the general theory of deviance training.

Though school leaders may feel that they must segregate disruptive youth from well-behaving ones, the impact of these practices may be more harmful than good. Research shows that suspending a child may increase the chance that the student will engage in further deviance while absent from school. Once they return to the school setting, they are more likely to be harmful to their peers, consequently, being suspended again (40% of suspensions are given to repeat offenders). In essence, the supposed safety measure may help one child, but ultimately hurts two or more in the process.

Evaluation of Group Treatment Programs At-A-Glance

Type of Program & Group Treatment Programs	Impact/Effectiveness	Viable Alternatives & Solutions
<p>Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare</p> <p>Scared Straight, Wilderness Camps, Military – Style Boot Camps, Brat Camp, Vocational Training Schools, Detention Centers, Group Incarceration, Institutional or group foster care, Group counseling by probation officer</p>	<p>Linked to worse behavioral outcomes, especially if the adult leaders are not highly trained or do not provide sufficient supervision.</p> <p>33% less effective than individual counseling approaches.</p> <p>Long-term placement in group treatment programs might do more harm than good.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Increase staff peer youth ratio -Increase degree of structure of residential program. -Separate older youth from younger youth that have committed similar crimes. -Individual counseling -Multi-dimensional Foster Care (MTFC) to train foster parents. -Programs that provide parenting strategies.
<p>Neighborhood, Housing & Community Programs</p> <p>Midnight Basketball, Sports Leagues, After-School, Summer Camps</p>	<p>Youth that are place in after-school groups displayed higher rates of deviant behavior, suspensions, and disciplinary actions.</p> <p>Youth who live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty are at risk for committing more crimes than if they lived in a more advantaged neighborhood.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More structured programs that provide youth with skills and opportunities to interact with adults in positive settings. -Programs should not organize or target programs exclusively composed of high-risk youth. This will discourage the group from organizing “its collective identity in terms of deviance.” -Avoid grouping vulnerable adolescents with more deviant peers.
<p>Education</p> <p>Alternative schools, Academic Tracking, retention, self-contained classrooms for children with emotional or behavioral disorders,, suspension, expulsion, or placement into alternative Schools</p>	<p>School policies that group deviant youth increase the likelihood of violent crimes in schools by 28%.</p> <p>Deviant youth are drawn to youth with similar behavior and create a collective identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Eliminate tracking of low performing youth. -Eliminate “pull out” programs and implement school-wide behavior management policies. -Train teachers in behavioral management. -Integrate social competence enhancement into school curriculum.

Recommendations

Overall, the panel put forth four recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners:

- **Programs, placements, and treatments that aggregate deviant youth and are ineffective as well as costly should be terminated whenever possible.**



- **Effective alternatives to deviant peer-group placement are available and should be supported.**

- **Policy decision-makers should take into account the system-wide impact of interventions and placement on both deviant youth and their communities.**

- **Practitioners, programs, and policymakers should document the peer context of each placement and evaluate the impact of each placement on the youth and the community.**

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