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TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM BULLETIN

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A Practical Approach to Linking Graduated Sanctions with a Continuum of Effective Programs

EDITORS NOTE:

This is the first of five Technical Assistance Bulletins that will be published by the Juvenile Sanctions Center during this Phase of the project. This Bulletin examines the connection between structured decision making instruments and the characteristics of “best practices” in treatment programs for juvenile offenders. This bulletin will also introduce a prototype instrument referred to as, The Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP), which itemizes the characteristics of effective programs. This bulletin will provide vital information for the practitioner as well as the researcher in juvenile justice about what should be considered when placing juvenile offenders in programs. The Juvenile Sanctions Center would like to thank the authors of this article, James C. “Buddy” Howell, Ph.D. and Mark W. Lipsey, Ph.D. for their excellent work and valuable contribution to the juvenile justice field. Future Juvenile Sanctions Center Technical Assistance Bulletins will address other important issues that provide information on how to improve programming in a juvenile graduated sanctions system.

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“Graduated sanctions” are now a commonly used tool for controlling juvenile offenders; however, little attention has been paid to the programs that need to be linked with them. In this bulletin, we describe a systematic approach to developing practice guidelines from the large body of outcome research on delinquency programs and using this knowledge to evaluate and improve routine programs spanning the continuum from prevention to treatment. We first review the main decision making tools that need to be used in the juvenile justice system to improve the overall management of offenders and programs. Recent research on the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs is summarized next, followed by a description of how that research is used to characterize effective program practice in ways that allow ready comparison with actual program practice and provide guidance for improvement.

TOOLS FOR IMPROVING JUVENILE JUSTICE PROGRAMS

Four main “structured decision making” (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003) tools are available for improving juvenile justice system programming in a graduated sanctions framework: risk assessment, needs/strengths assessment, a disposition matrix for linking offenders with a continuum of sanctions and programs, and a protocol for evaluating programs against the most effective evaluated programs. The first three are described briefly below.¹ The fourth one is featured in this bulletin (see also Howell & Lipsey, 2004).

1 Juvenile Sanctions Center. Graduated Sanctions for Juvenile Offenders: A Program Model and Planning Guide. (2003)

First, though, it is important to clarify the proper characteristics of “graduated sanctions.” Because of exaggerated claims about growing juvenile violence, and myths about the ineffectiveness of juvenile and family courts, extensive use of punitive sanctions in juvenile and family courts and correctional agencies has become commonplace (see Howell, 2003b). Hence, the term, graduated sanctions, is often used to refer only to punitive sanctions. This is unfortunate because punitive approaches are not effective for reducing recidivism, and some of them, such as “Scared Straight” (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000), shock incarceration, and boot camps may actually increase recidivism (Howell, 2003b; Lipsey, 1995; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998).

Graduated sanctions properly refers to the continuum of disposition options that juvenile court judges and court staff have at their disposal (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003).² However, sanctions provide only the context for service delivery; the programs that address the underlying family, school, peer group, and individual problems are most likely to produce change in offenders. “For graduated sanctions to fulfill its promise, it must be accompanied by methods for insuring that the right juveniles are linked to the right programs” (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003, p. 77).

As offenders’ delinquent careers progress, and they are moved to more restrictive levels in a graduated sanctions system, the rehabilitation programs linked with them must be more structured and intensive to deal effectively with the multiple treatment needs typical of offender careers (Howell, 1995). 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).

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) 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); and
5. Aftercare (consisting of a continuum of step-down program options that culminate in discharge).

These gradations—and the sublevels that can be crafted within them—form a continuum of sanction options that should be paralleled by a continuum of treatment options, to create an array of referral and disposition resources for law enforcement, juvenile and family courts, and juvenile corrections officials. The effectiveness of graduated sanctions when used in conjunction with treatment programs is demonstrated by research on juvenile offenders, nationwide program assessments, and a number of state and local program and policy studies (Howell, 2003b: 205-207).

2 The term, graduated sanctions, also is frequently used to refer to a schedule of incentives and administratively applied consequences (e.g., by probation officers) in response to an offender’s degree of compliance with specific conditions or requirements within a particular supervision or program setting (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003: 3; see Howell, 2003b: 283-286 for examples)

Descriptions and advantages of using the main SDM tools follow. These increase the capacity of juvenile court and correctional agencies to manage offenders effectively and efficiently in a graduated sanctions framework. “Many agencies, even those that have expanded their graduated sanctions programming--do not have that capacity because they are still using informal methods in case decision making. Since informal approaches are highly subjective, the resulting decisions are often inconsistent and/or inappropriate” (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003, p. 77).

Risk Assessment. Because official records contain an incomplete picture of offenders’ delinquent histories, risk assessment instruments and the most serious current offense are used to determine the sanctions level needed to protect the public. A validated risk assessment instrument can identify high risk youth who are at least three times more likely to re-offend than youth who are classified as low risk (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003). Such risk assessment instruments have been validated on at least 8 state juvenile populations and in numerous other studies (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003; Howell, 2003b, pp. 267-68). A model risk assessment instrument is available (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003, p. 83), however, it needs to be validated in each locality, because research shows some variation in the strength of predictors by geographical area.

Youth and Family Needs/Strengths Assessment. In the structured decision-making process, needs/strengths assessment results are used to guide the placement in programs of offenders within the various risk levels. A youth and family needs/strengths assessment is intended to do the following (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003):

- Provide an overview of the level of seriousness of the juvenile offender’s treatment needs;
- Provide concise information that can assist professionals in developing a treatment plan to address the juvenile’s needs;
- Provide a baseline for monitoring the juvenile’s progress;

- Provide a basis for establishing workload priorities; and
- Aid agency administrators in evaluating resource availability throughout the jurisdiction and determining program gaps that need to be filled.

Local professionals are responsible for selecting the items to include in the youth and family needs/strengths assessment instrument. A model youth and family needs/strengths assessment instrument that can be modified to suit local needs and interests is available (Juvenile Sanctions Center, 2003, pp. 90-93).

Use of a Disposition Matrix to match offenders with programs. A formal disposition matrix helps place offenders at the most appropriate level in the system of sanctions and increases the precision of program matching. It organizes sanctions and program interventions by risk level and the most serious current adjudicated offense. A sample disposition matrix for youth adjudicated delinquent has been made available by the Juvenile Sanctions Center (2003, p. 87). Using their best professional judgment, local juvenile justice system (JJS) managers determine the specific program formats that are to be used within each level of sanctions.

The key to making SDM tools work as effectively as possible for reducing delinquency is to optimize the effectiveness of the programs that are matched to the risk/need level in the disposition scheme. We next turn attention to our main theme of this bulletin, how to use research evidence to improve the effectiveness of programs.

A PROTOCOL FOR EVALUATING JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM PROGRAMS

Analyses of more than 600 studies of the effects of programs on delinquency at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies has provided the foundation for evaluating juvenile justice system programs against “best practices.” The database

is analyzed in an OJJDP project to identify and describe the characteristics of effective programs with the greatest implications for improving practice in juvenile justice settings. This bulletin describes a protocol that has emerged from this work for evaluating juvenile justice system programs in this manner.

EFFECTIVE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM PROGRAMS

Application of the systematic research synthesis techniques of meta-analysis³ to the large body of research on the effectiveness of delinquency prevention and intervention programs has resulted in a number of well-documented and largely encouraging findings. For instance, the overall average effect on recidivism found for those programs that have been evaluated using control group designs is positive and statistically significant, though of rather modest magnitude (Lipsey, 1992, 1995; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). The variation around that average, however, is quite large, indicating that the effects of some programs are quite sizeable while those of others are negligible or even negative. Such a broad range not only means that properly configured programs can be very effective but that there is generally room for most programs to be revised in ways that will improve them. Of course, on the downside, it also means that poorly configured programs will most likely be ineffective.

Not surprisingly, the programs that show the largest effects in the research literature are research and demonstration (R&D) projects set up under circumstances that are typically more favorable than those attainable in routine juvenile justice practice. These more favorable circumstances typically include

more monitoring of implementation integrity, fewer difficulties in treatment implementation, and greater intensity of treatment. Nonetheless, the available evaluations of programs developed and/or used by JJS practitioners find that most of them reduce recidivism, at least slightly, and nearly one-fifth of them produce very meaningful reductions (Lipsey, 1999b).

These findings indicate that juvenile justice programs used in routine practice can be effective but that this does not happen automatically. At the same time, they highlight the importance of certain favorable program characteristics and suggest that incorporating those characteristics might make programs more effective.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO IMPROVING JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM PROGRAMS

If research on the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs shows that certain program characteristics are associated with greater reductions in recidivism, it is a good bet that practical programs that incorporate those characteristics will be more effective than those that do not. A potentially useful way to apply that research, therefore, is to describe those favorable program characteristics specifically enough for practitioners to be able to determine how well their programs match them and, if appropriate, how to improve the match. One goal of the current meta-analysis work, therefore, is to generate very specific research-based profiles of program characteristics that can be used both as a “best practices” standard against which to evaluate juvenile justice programs and a roadmap for

3 Meta-analysis is a quantitative technique for coding, analyzing, and summarizing research evidence. The magnitude of the intervention effects of the studies under review is represented with statistics known as “effect sizes,” e.g., the magnitude of the difference between the mean values on the outcome variable like recidivism for the individuals receiving intervention and those in the control group (Lipsey and Wilson, 2001). Effect sizes are then analyzed in various ways, e.g., summarized as overall means or compared for different groups of studies. This method of synthesizing research enables a researcher to examine a wide range of program evaluations, and a great deal of coded detail about each, in a systematic and relatively objective manner. In addition, the specificity of meta-analysis results often makes them easier to translate into practice than narrative review results—as will be seen later in this bulletin.

improving them.

For these purposes, then, “best practices” refers to a differentiated set of program characteristics, various combinations of which are shown in research studies to be associated with positive outcomes, even for serious and violent juvenile offenders (Lipsey, 1999a, 1999b; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). In particular, Lipsey’s most recent meta-analysis of nearly 600 research studies in his meta-analysis database has identified the following three major features related to the effectiveness of juvenile delinquency programs:

1. The nature and mix of program services provided to the juveniles.

Careful identification of the distinct services in programs represented in research studies reveals that there are typically multiple services in each program (an average of 5.5 per program) and they appear in myriad combinations in different programs. Thus, from a practical standpoint, efforts to improve juvenile treatment and rehabilitation programs necessarily must focus on combinations of individual service components. For purposes of creating best practice program profiles, this situation can be approached by describing each program in terms of a primary service and some number of supplementary services. The differential effectiveness of various combinations is then assessed as follows:

- Primary service type—more and less effective primary services are identified on the basis of the independent recidivism reductions associated with them, that is, their effects when the influence of any companion services is statistically controlled.
- Supplementary services—the effective supplementary services are those which, when combined with a given primary service, are associated with significantly greater recidivism reductions than those associated with the primary service alone.

2. The amount of service the program provides to each juvenile.

Not surprisingly, the meta-analysis shows that the total amount of service a program provides is related to its recidivism effects. Up to some optimal point (that varies among programs), more service is associated with larger effects. Most of the influence of the amount of service can be captured in two related program characteristics:

- The total number of contact hours/days the program has with each juvenile.
- The duration of the program, e.g., the number of weeks from the date of the first regular service contact to the date of the last regular contact.

3. The characteristics of the juveniles served by the program.

Some juveniles are more responsive to a given type of service than others. Many aspects of their backgrounds, personalities, and experiences may account for this, but most such characteristics are not usually examined very closely in research on program effectiveness. Two general characteristics of the juvenile clients that are often documented in the research, however, were found to be associated with the outcomes of many programs:

- Risk level—some programs are more effective for high-risk than low-risk juveniles and vice versa for others.
- Age—some programs are more effective for older or younger offenders, with the younger group generally identified as those 12 to about 15 years old, the older group about 16 to 18.

Collectively, the way in which these features are related to the effects of juvenile justice programs tells us much about what works best and for whom. These features, in turn, can be configured into program profiles that identify the characteristics that the research evidence indicates should constitute the “best practices” for juvenile justice programs.⁴

⁴ For more detailed information on this user-friendly approach, see Howell & Lipsey (2004).

A PROTOTYPE 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 1 (see page 7) shows a 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 SPEP sections allocate a maximum of 40 additional points according to the incremental 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

servicing juveniles with the risk level and age for which this intervention works best (items 5 and 6); that is, for youth at different risk levels, and for older versus younger youths. Used as an assessment of a particular JJS program with the designated primary service, 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 this rating scheme to assess their existing programs and identify options for improving them. For example, they could opt to discard a weak program in favor of a more effective one. Alternatively, they might add an appropriate supplementary service component, arrange to deliver a more optimal amount of service, or alter the type of client targeted in order to improve the existing program.

Although it has not yet been validated with outcome data, this approach holds promise for assisting programs administered or sponsored by JJS practitioners to more closely approach the recidivism reductions demonstrated by the most effective programs represented in the research literature. Indeed, our meta-analysis of research studies for juvenile court programs suggest that incremental improvements in the average court supervision program can potentially cut recidivism nearly in half Table 1 (see page 9).

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.

FIGURE 1

FAMILY COUNSELING TEMPLATE IN THE STANDARDIZED PROGRAM EVALUATION PROTOCOL FOR NORTH CAROLINA'S JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM PROGRAMS

Court Delinquency Supervision Programs	
<p>Family Counseling [Family Counseling, family systems intervention, functional family therapy, family crisis counseling; involves the juvenile and parents(s) or entire family.]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Typical programs of this type are effective, and above average</p>	60 Points
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"/>
<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"/>
<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"/>
<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]	<input type="checkbox"/>
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]	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total Points	
<input type="text"/>	

Source: A Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol for North Carolina's Juvenile Justice System Programs (p. 16), by M. W. Lipsey, J. C. Howell, and 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.

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 juvenile justice system 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 programs 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 whether 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 treatment plan details within each intervention program must be left to the respective service professionals to individualize for each juvenile.

SUMMARY

“Graduated sanctions” is often misused to describe punitive actions that, presumably, will reduce delinquency. In and of themselves, graduated sanctions rarely change juvenile offenders’ behavior. It is the ameliorative programs provided within a graduated sanctions system that produce change in offenders. Advanced structured decision making tools are available to assist juvenile justice system professionals in developing a continuum of graduated sanctions that can be linked with a continuum of treatment options, both components of which can be matched with considerable precision to offenders’ recidivism risk level and treatment needs. However, effective programs must be used if the graduated sanctions system and linked interventions can be expected to produce worthwhile positive outcomes.

continued on page 10

TABLE 1

**Recidivism Rates for Juveniles in Programs in the
Research Database with Successively More of the
SPEP-Recommended Characteristics
(from database used to create the corresponding SPEP ratings)**

COURT DELINQUENCY SUPERVISION PROGRAMS

<u>Condition</u>	<u>Recidivism Rate</u>
Recidivism rates for comparable juveniles not in a program (rounded off value from control groups; predominant metric is police arrest/contact 6 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 & 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

Meta-analyses of nearly 600 studies of the effects of programs on delinquency at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies has provided the foundation for development of an instrument (the SPEP) for applying research results in this manner. The use of the SPEP instrument in the juvenile justice system complements the application of risk and needs assessment instruments for purposes of program improvement, identifying program gaps and shaping service plans for individual clients. Effective prevention and rehabilitation programs are integral to an effective graduated sanctions system. Use of the SPEP is a practical approach for potentially making existing programs more effective.

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