

Effective System Improvement in Juvenile Justice

Why the perception that “nothing works” in juvenile justice?



In the 1970s and 80s, the prevailing perception was that “nothing works” in juvenile justice. This notion raised doubts about the effectiveness of rehabilitative practices and led to the rise of more punitive practices focusing on

offense-based sentencing.

This perception stems from research, including the following examples.

- Martinson concluded that “nothing works,” with which other researchers agreed as recently as 1989.
- Hope was lost in models that used individualized rehabilitation plans as a means to reduce future system involvement.

Research Findings on Program Effectiveness



More recent research shows that programs and interventions are effective for certain groups of system-involved youth. Since the late 1990s, efforts like OJJDP’s comprehensive strategies for

juvenile offenders, studies of evidence-based practices, and a push for program evaluation has led to a better understanding about what works in

juvenile justice. Intervention effectiveness can be found within particular limits.

Empirical research findings suggest the following.

- Programs are most effective when applied only to the youth at highest risk of re-arrests or re-offending. The same programs can cause negative effects when applied to youth at lower risk levels.
- Low-risk youth should be diverted from the juvenile system. Research shows that low-risk, system-involved youth can suffer negative consequences.
- Even the most effective programs show only modest results. For example, cognitive behavioral therapies may reduce re-offending from 40% to 30%.
- Effectiveness is found only when services address needs pertaining to the offending and arrest.
- Program effectiveness is even weaker for those who are incarcerated.
- Correctional sanctions and placement in secure settings have been shown to increase recidivism.



Recommendations for Effective System Improvement



The growing knowledge base on program effectiveness indicates the existence of programs that work. Common themes and core elements of these effective

programs have been identified. Effectiveness often is established by demonstrating better outcomes for system-involved youth enrolled in these programs compared to youth with similar system involvement who are not.

Empirical research findings suggest the following approaches.

- Use valid assessments.
- Focus resources and target interventions only to young people most likely to re-offend or be re-arrested.

- Ensure effective interventions are implemented as intended.
- Avoid wasting resources on interventions that do not work. Programs are sometimes assumed to be effective, but later are found to have the opposite effect (e.g., DARE operated for many years before people accepted the research demonstrating its ineffectiveness).
- Reduce the use of corrective sanctions and placement in secure settings.
- Serve youth in the community and focus on positive youth development.



Find Out More

NCCD works to improve outcomes for young people by helping systems make better decisions. For more information, visit www.nccdglobal.org or contact NCCD at info@nccdglobal.org or (800) 306-6223.

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