

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Girls Study Group: Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency

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Working with Protective Factors

Summary/Conclusions

This study explored why some girls are more resilient than others in the face of adversity. Resilience was defined as "a person's ability to positively adapt or achieve success despite having faced situations...that could lead to negative outcomes such as delinquency." The study examined four specific protective factors and their effect on girls' delinquency. Taking into account the pre-existing risk factors and the girls' ages, the researchers tried to determine how much each of the protective factors could effect the risk factors. The outcomes were mixed, with some protective factors being stronger than others, depending on the risk factors and developmental age.

Limitations of Information

The researchers noted several limitations, which is not uncommon with self-reported data. There may have been over-reporting of some events, while other events were underreported. Researchers asked the respondents about past abuse or neglect; however, youth may not be able to judge these situations accurately. Also, the representative sample was composed of "average" girls, which may not accurately compare to probationers.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

In Colorado juvenile probation, girls comprise about 22% of the population (FY08 Annual Report). How girls respond to stresses and negative events in their lives can have an impact on their success. This study explored how girls' risks are effected by four protective factors: the presence of a caring adult, school connectedness, school success, and religiosity. The study used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which was collected in three waves: waves 1 and 2 included 7th-12th graders in 1995 and 1996; wave 3 included initial respondents who were now 18-26 year olds in 2000 and 2001.

Researchers identified four risk indicators (physical assault, sexual assault, neglect, and neighborhood disadvantage), for which they initially controlled, while measuring the protective factors mentioned above. The study found "the extent to which adolescent girls believed an adult cared about them served as a protective factor against several forms of delinquency."

Although previous research has found that school connectedness to be a protective factor, the present study did not confirm this result.

The results of analysis regarding school success found it to be a significant protective factor against some delinquency for adolescents and young adults (waves 2 and 3).

Religiosity was found to have no protective effect, with the exception of one specific age group of girls.

When the researchers took into account the abovementioned risk factors, they

found the effect of protective factors was enhanced, mitigated, or negated by certain risk factors. The results were varied and dependent upon risk, age, protective factor, and delinquent act.

Practical Applications

- √ Case plans must be individualized to address each probationer's unique strengths and risk areas.
- √ Treatment matching is critical to ensuring the probationer is placed in a program that will decrease risk and enhance protective factors.
- √ Identify at least one pro-social support in the probationer's life, with whom you can establish rapport and assist the probationer in building support.
- √ Recognize and build on multiple strengths, understanding that factors outside of probation's control (ie: neighborhoods) may mitigate the strength of protective factors.
- √ Realize that males and females may respond differently to protective factors. Identify these protective factors and encourage growth in these areas through targeted target interventions.
- √ Females are more likely to have been abused than their male counterparts. Be aware of their additional sensitivities and needs in this area, making referrals as appropriate.
- √ Build social supports by utilizing mentoring programs in the community, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

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