A RESEARCH PROJECT ON A COMMUNITY-FOCUSED METHOD OF DELINQUENCY CONTROL

An Assessment of the Effectiveness of the Corner-Group-Worker Method of Controlling Delinquency in Juvenile Gangs

Nature of the Project

The Special Youth Program (SYP) is a demonstration program set up to test the effectiveness of several techniques for controlling and reducing juvenile delinquency in a densely populated, rapidly changing, lower-income area of Boston. It began operations in June 1954 with plans to continue until June 1957, a 3 year period. The project is financed through private local sources.

The primary purpose of the project is an action purpose—the reduction and control of delinquency. It seeks to accomplish this end by the simultaneous application of three techniques; 1) Intensive work with actually or potentially troublesome street corner gangs by trained social group workers; 2) Identification of and arranging for special services to a selected group of disturbed or unstable families whose offspring tend to become delinquent; 3) Work with existing organized community groups and creating of new groups to mobilize community effort around local problems relating to juvenile delinquency and to strengthen community morale.

The secondary purpose of the project is a research purpose. The research has two primary focuses 1) evaluation of the effectiveness of project methods and 2) providing factual information on the nature of the community and of local culture. A full-time director of research joined the project ten months after initial operations and is currently working in this area. An overall research plan designed to evaluate the effectiveness of all three SYP approaches to delinquency control has been developed (See accompanying statement "Current Research Possibilities of the Special Youth Program"). However, major research efforts up to now have concentrated on work with street-corner gangs, and it is planned to continue this concentration.

Aims of the Research

Troublesome teenage street-corner gangs are being worked with according to a comparatively new method—the corner-group worker method. A professional social worker trained in group work technique establishes relations with one to three street-corner gangs and attempts to alter their pattern of delinquent activity by directing their energies into socially acceptable channels. To do this he or she uses a range of primarily group-centered techniques. (For a fuller description of project method see "What About 'Reaching Out'—An Account of the Boston Youth Project": David M. Austin—in "The Round Table," Vol. XIX, No. 7-8, Sept.-Oct.'55). Eight groups, four male and four female, have been worked with up to the present time.

Research conducted in relation to work with groups is of two basic types, Assessive or Evaluative, and Informational. The aim of informational research is to gather factual information on the present-day urban street-corner gang—its structure, culture, and activity patterns. The evaluative research is cast in a conceptual framework developed by cultural anthropology—that of "induced culture change". This framework applies in situation where a specified group with a characteristic culture, set of values, condoned behavior patterns, etc., attempts deliberately to alter values, attitudes, behavior patterns, etc, etc., of a second group so that they will conform more closely with its own. In this instance the first group consists of adult social workers embracing values and cultural practices characteristic of American middle-class society; the second
group consists of adolescent street-corner gang members embracing values and cultural practices characteristic of lower class street corner society. The basic research question in this area is—"What are the effects of the street-corner worker method on the street-corner gang?" This general question can be broken down into six more specific questions, with answers to subsequent questions dependent on data furnished in answer to prior questions. These questions are: 1) What changes have occurred in group structure and culture, and in specified behaviors, attitudes and perceptions of members of corner groups engaged by the workers? 2) What is the direction and nature of such changes? 3) To what extent do changes in different areas appear to be related to one another? 4) To what extent can observed changes be attributed to the worker's efforts? 5) To what extent can specific changes be attributed to specific efforts of the worker? 6) To what extent are observed changes in a direction desired by various segments of the community?

Research Method

Two major procedural approaches to the basic question—"What are the effects of the corner-group worker method on the adolescent corner gang?"—have been devised. The first approach focuses on intro-project dynamics, employs a longitudinal analytic dimension and multi-variable analysis, and relies primarily on in-project data sources. It aims to answer the above-cited set of questions relating to observed changes in various areas. The second approach is concerned with the problem of controls; it uses an extra-project control population, a limited number of selected variables, and is based on independently gathered, non-project data sources. It aims to answer the question—"Are there significant differences in the frequency and types of selected forms of official misbehavior between groups worked with by the SYP and analogous groups in adjacent areas not worked with?" Research procedures for each of these approaches have been devised.

Research method for the first approach involves 5 basic procedures.

1. Collection of Data: The primary and most voluminous source of research data is the daily process records kept by the several corner-group workers. Each worker records from one-half to five single-spaced pages of data for 3 to 6 contacts per week with his group or in his area. This data, while necessarily selective in terms of the major concerns of the worker, is highly detailed, and presents a type of material that could result only from direct and intimate action involvement with the research subjects. At present there are over 1,500 single-spaced pages of such records, containing a wealth of data on adolescent corner-group life in particular and lower-class community life in general. By the proposed project cut-off date there will be well over 3,000 pages of worker records.

Other sources of data currently and prospectively available are: 1) Interviews with workers by the research director containing supplementary data on the street-corner groups and data on the motives and values of the workers. There are at present over 400 pages of such interview data. 2) The tape recordings of group meetings and interviews with group members. 3) Face Sheet data on all members of 12 street-corner groups contacted by the SYP. These include both boys and girls groups and average about 20 members each. 4) The journal of the project Executive Director, containing reports of conferences with the workers and much additional relevant data. Approximately 750 single-spaced pages are currently available, and at least that many more will be compiled. 5) General project files containing an extensive file of newspaper clippings bearing on project concerns and other relevant data.
Also available are reports of direct observation of the street-corner groups by
the research director. Such data is presently limited; the possibility of in-
creased direct observation and interviewing of corner group members will depend
on developments in the service program.

2. Processing of Collected Data: It is planned to subject the total body of
collected data to a uniform and consistent coding process. A system of cate-
gories has been developed by which data can be coded bearing on attitudes and
behavior in reference to six major areas: 1) Members of actor's street-corner
group; 2) Non-group peers; 3) Concerned adults; 4) Local organizations and
institutions; 5) General cultural phenomena, areas of concern; 6) Material
objects, property (See enclosed schedule "Preliminary version of General Data-
coding Categories for Corner-group workers' Contact Records").

3. Analysis of Coded Data: The primary objective of data analysis is the pro-
duction of a comprehensive report on the effects of the street-corner group
worker method on the behavior and attitudes of individuals worked with. Although
the exact form of the report cannot be predicted with certainty, major chapter
headings might include the following: The Special Youth Program, philosophy,
organization, operating methods. The Corner Groups: structure, culture, values.
The Workers: characteristics, values, effectiveness. Effects of Behavior Change;
overt behavior, attitudes, perceptions. Effects on Official Delinquency; court
cases, truancy record, neighborhood comparisons. Relations with the Community;
other youth-serving agencies, parents and local adults; changes in community
perceptions, actions. Social Science and Social Work: the joint functioning of
social service and social science research in a community-directed change project.
The data-processing system outlined above makes possible the presentation of
analysis both in qualitative and quantitative form, and the application of a wide
range of analytic techniques. A primary analytic technique in the area "changes
in group behavior and attitudes" will involve longitudinal arrangement of dated
data bearing on designated categories. This will provide data both as to
quantitative incidence and qualitative changes; (e.g. "What changes have occurred
during a three year period in area x?"—incidence of petty theft, attitudes to
policemen, etc.) The attempt will be made to correlate incidence trends with
aspects of the corner-group workers' activity (frequency of presence in area;
nature of programmed activities, etc.) and other possible causative factors in
the community situation (degree of police activity; presence of paroles in
area, etc.).

On a descriptive level it will be possible to derive general statements about the
nature of teenage street-corner groups, patterns of delinquent activity character-
istic of different age levels, values and attitudes of group members, educational
and occupational aspiration levels, etc. This will provide basic data on the
nature and context of present-day teenage street-corner group life in an urban
community.

4. Evaluation of Analyzed Results: A technique has been developed for converting
results phrased in terms of incidence change into an evaluative framework. Given
answers to the question—"What changes have occurred or have been induced?", a
subsequent question will be—"To what extent are observed changes in a desired
direction?". This technique involves assembling data in four areas: 1) A list-
ing of customary activity patterns of the street-corner group; 2) Evaluative
rating of the various activities by designated segments of the community, e.g.
clergy, social workers, law-enforcement officials, etc. (a standardized
questionnaire for obtaining this data has been developed); 3) Data on the increase
or decrease of the various activities; 4) Comparison of the results of the
approval-disapproval scale with observed increase-decrease rates (e.g., increase of a valued activity or decrease of a disvalued activity are adjudged successful; converse developments adjudged unsuccessful). This technique will make possible statements as to the success of the program a) in different areas of activity b) in terms of the different value and success criteria of different segments of the community.

5. Reporting Research Results: Concurrent with later stages of analysis and evaluation will be the collection of obtained descriptive, analytic, and evaluative material into an organized comprehensive report covering project experience over a three year period. Definite plans for publication auspices and financing the report-writing period have not as yet been made.

Research Findings to Date

Work on this project has been going forward for approximately one year (March, 1955—March 1956). During this period a major block of time was devoted to assessing the research potentialities of the service project and formulating an overall research design, part of which is outlined above. In addition, a number of tentative conclusions relating primarily to work with groups have been formulated. These could be denoted as preliminary research findings. Following is a selected list of 12 such findings.

1. It is possible for a trained adult worker to establish a relationship with an adolescent street-corner group defined by the community as "delinquent", through which he may exert significant influence on the customary behavior patterns of the group.

2. The capacity of a worker to establish a relationship with a street-corner group through which behavior change may be induced has little correlation with the respective ethnic statuses of worker and group, has some correlation with the respective class status of worker and group, and appears to be highly correlated with a combination of specific personality factors and the nature of the worker's professional training.

3. A worker who establishes and maintains an effective relationship with members of a street-corner group tends to become increasingly involved with the parents of group members.

4. The efforts of a corner-group worker can produce significant changes in the structural form of the corner group; it can be restructured from an informal grouping with informal leadership and member roles to a grouping modelled on the standard American organizational pattern, with elected officers, a set of by-laws, regularly recurrent planned meetings, dues, informal criteria of membership, and a schedule of socially condoned activities.

5. The efforts of the worker can effect significant changes in the customary collective activity patterns of the street-corner group.

6. The efforts of the worker can substantially increase the ability of the street-corner group to function effectively in the coordination of collective action.

7. Due to important differences between boys' and girls' groupings in structure (girls' groups smaller, considerably less stable) and motivation under-lying group membership, different service goals and operating techniques are required for work with girls' groups.
8. The efforts of the worker tend to intensify an inherent tendency of street-
corner groups to comprise two factions, one of which espouses goals more socially-
condoned than the other, and to produce two reasonably distinct sub-groups
with significantly different standards and behavior patterns.

9. The presence of adult workers with the major troublesome adolescent groups
in a community tends to produce a reduction in those forms of delinquent activ-
ity related to inter-group friction (e.g., gang fights, assaults on rival
groups member, individual fights between members of different groups).

10. The more prevalent and deep-rooted the pattern of delinquent behavior of
members of a street-corner group, the more concentrated, persistent, and ex-
tended is the effort required by a corner-group worker to effect any signifi-
cant change in group activity patterns.

11. The presence of an adult worker with a street-corner group provides a
channel of communication between group members and members of the adult commu-
nity which can serve to reduce friction and misunderstanding between the two,
and enable group members better to utilize community resources in pursuing
their own ends.

12. The establishment in a given community of a program utilizing the corner-
group worker technique tends to be initially perceived as threatening by exist-
ing formalized agencies working with adolescents (the settlement house, the
court, the parole division, the boy's club, the church youth program) and will
arouse an initial antagonism, in varying degrees, by these agencies.

The degree to which these statements can be considered validated or demonstrated
varies considerably. Some (Nos 1, 4, 5, 7, 11) can be considered as substantially
validated by data already available; others (3, 8, 10, 12) appear reasonably well
established, but need additional data to strengthen validation or possibly modify
their form; others (2, 9) need to have considerably additional data brought to bear
on them, and could be designated as research hypotheses at this stage of the
research.

As yet no published reports incorporating research findings have been issued, but
a considerable amount of material has been presented in formal presentations in the
Boston area (at Judge Baker Guidance Center, Boston University, Harvard, Boston
College, elsewhere). Plans exist for publication by Judge Baker Guidance Center,
Boston, of a paper containing research data on the nature of street corner groups.
Much material has also been communicated in the course of conferences with similar
projects (New York City Youth Board Research staff, Chicago Hyde Park project, etc.)
In addition, five student research papers developed within the project's research
framework have been written. (On file, Special Youth Program Files.).

The proposed research will relate to previous research efforts in three ways: 1) It
will expand on, amplify, or modify present findings; 2) It will attempt to
furnish additional validation for findings now tentatively established or phrased
as hypotheses; 3) It will develop a range of new findings not as yet established.

The final report will present in detail supporting evidence for present and prospec-
tive findings as well as exposition on the relationship between various findings.
Comparable Research in this Area

The corner-group worker method of working with troublesome teen-age gangs (also called the "detached-worker" or "street-club worker" method) has been and is currently being employed in a variety of forms and in a range of contexts in a number of cities in the United States. Systematic application of this technique in a form analogous to that employed by the Special Youth Program is being made in about a dozen instances, primarily in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. Most of these projects have come into being since 1945, and little systematic effort to evaluate their effectiveness has been made. Of service projects started since 1947, in three known instances plans have been made for a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of this method, or aspects of the method, by trained research personnel. None of these research projects are directly analogous, in conception or design, to the project described here, although areas of overlap exist in each case. Moreover, none of these efforts have yielded published material.

The effort most closely resembling the present project in general design was projected but never completed. The Central Harlem Street-Clubs Project conducted from 1947-50 by the New York City Welfare Council employed a research specialist (Daniel Malamud) who devoted some attention to evaluating the effectiveness of work with groups. Research efforts based on a preliminary consideration of workers' process records yielded information included as part of the publication "Working with Teen-Age Gangs" (Welfare Council of New York City, 1950). This material, while of considerable value, was selective and admittedly based on incomplete data, and plans for a more systematic processing of records did not materialize. The research described herein differs from that planned by the Welfare Council in that it utilizes a substantially different basic research framework ("induced culture change"), employs a specially developed technique for processing and analysing data, and is based on a significantly different range of field data.

The New York City Youth Board is currently utilizing the corner-group worker method on a wide scale and is rapidly expanding operations in this area. Four district units, each generally analogous to the Special Youth Program, are currently in operation--the Bedford-Stuyvesant Unit (formed 1950), the South Brooklyn Unit (1951), the East Harlem Unit (1951), and the Bronz Unit (1955). All are under the administrative jurisdiction of the NYC Youth Board. Up to October 1955 no systematic evaluative research on the street worker method was undertaken. In that month a social psychologist (Dr. Seymour Lieberman), was hired to formulate research applying to operations of all four units. A preliminary research plan was formulated, and attempts made to secure funds to finance the research. Four possible research directions have been outlined (See "Some Preliminary Notes on the Research Potential for the Council of Social and Athletics Clubs Program", S. Lieberman, Dec. '55, Mm., NYC Youth Board), one of which resembles to some extent the method outlined here. (p. 15, Op. Cit.) However, it appears at this time that the basic research focus will be on worker attributes rather than effects on groups. This research, if executed, would be complementary to that herein proposed; a division of labor was discussed with the Youth Board Research staff by which the New York research would concentrate on factors differentiating more effective from less effective workers whereas this research has as a primary focus the question of intra-group dynamics and behavior change.

The third project involving both the use of the corner-group worker technique and a planned research effort is the Hyde Park Youth project in Chicago. The project started operations in May 1955 and employs a research director, Mr. John Gandy. However, street-corner work as such forms a relatively minor part of current operations, and no systematic method of evaluating this aspect of the project has as yet been formulated.
Importance of this Research

1. Evaluative Research: A growing number of American communities are confronted with serious problems arising from the increasing prevalence of juvenile delinquency in general, and gang delinquency in particular. The corner-group worker method is among the newest of a range of treatment techniques developed to cope with this problem. One of its most important potential advantages lies in the fact that it attempts to induce changes on the behavioral level within the context of natural social groupings without the necessity of extended and costly individual therapy. Its utility is predicated on the assumption that there is a substantial range of troublesome adolescents whose behavior can be sufficiently modified by this method of treatment so as to remove them from that segment of the adolescent population which become the responsibility of penal or psychiatric treatment agencies. If this assumption can be supported, the method could prove of inestimable value to many communities—especially if it could be demonstrated that it is less costly than individual psychiatric treatment or institutionalization, or that it might, under certain circumstances, prove more effective than other currently available methods of treatment and prevention. It is possible, as suggested by Kurt Lewin, ("Frontiers of Group Dynamics", Human Relations, 1, 35, 1947) that behavior change induced in a group context may be more persistent than if otherwise induced. In addition, the preventive implications of this approach are of great importance. It encounters that range of youngsters most likely to adopt delinquent forms of behavior, in many cases before that behavior has become firmly established. The corner group worker is frequently in a position to exert the necessary pressure just at the point where it will have optimal effect in preventing an adolescent from moving over into the area of habitual illegal behavior.

Granting the value of results claimed for this approach to delinquency treatment and prevention, it is of paramount importance to discover, with some degree of assurance, whether or not its basic assumptions are valid. Wherever this method has been tried, there has been a feeling on the part of those involved that its effects were, on the whole, substantial and beneficial. But as yet no really systematic attempt to verify these impressions has been carried to completion.

The rarity of and need for adequate evaluative appraisal of delinquency programs in particular and community action programs in general has been pointed out with increasing frequency by many writers (e.g. Helen Wimer, in "The Effectiveness of Delinquency Prevention Programs," Ch. Bur., p. 47 et. infra, '54, lays great stress on the importance of adequate program evaluation). Research should prove of great value which can furnish even partial answers to the questions—What are the effects of this method? With what type of adolescents is it most effective? With what type is it least effective? What treatment techniques appear most effective with what groups? How does the cost to the community of this method compare with the cost of other methods currently available?

In addition to the value of the research results themselves, the assessive or evaluative techniques described above represents a relatively new approach to the problem of evaluation. This technique differs from evaluative techniques based on the subjective rating of "movement" in a group or client by a panel of professional raters. The core of the present method is the descriptive presentation of observed changes through time in a selected series of concrete, observable behavior patterns. It is an attempt to reduce to some extent the elements of subjectivity and observer bias involved in appraising success. The research project will also represent a test of the effectiveness of the evaluative technique employed. In so far as this technique proves useful or productive, it can be employed, tested further, and modified by current or future delinquency control projects (e.g. Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles) using similar service techniques.
2. Informational Research: The informational research focus aims to gather basic factual data on the nature of lowerclass adolescent street-corner group.

a) Need for basic data: Adequate factual data in this area, collected in terms of the descriptive and analytic categories of modern anthropology, sociology and psychology and applying to present-day conditions, are almost entirely lacking. The most significant presentation of data in this area was that of Thrasher, in 1925. (Thrasher, F. H. "The Gang," U. of Chicago Press, 1927). His work contains important substantive data and provides many guideposts for research, but it applies to a social milieu substantially different from that of today (Chicago--1925--urban slums with largely unassimilated ethic groups of very low economic status), and lacks the framework of a whole range of descriptive categories based on theoretical assumptions developed during the past 30 years (structural-functional analysis; psychodynamic theory, etc.). A recent work by A. K. Cohen (Cohen, A. K. "Delinquent Boys," Free Press, 1955) purportedly dealing with "The culture of the gang" in fact contains little substantive data as to gang culture (e.g. activity patterns, structure of major segments and subsegments, etc.) and does not go nearly as far as Thrasher in most important areas.

b) Need for middle-level research. Although a good deal of research in the field of juvenile delinquency is currently being conducted (See 'Research Relating to Children', U. S. Children's Bureau, Bull. II, 1953, and supplements 1 to 4), the great majority of projects operate either on a macroscopic social-statistic level, or on an individual, case-focused clinical level. Research on the first level deals primarily with increase or decrease in the incidence of official delinquency in selected areas at different times. Little attempt is made to relate these results to concrete or detailed behavior patterns--including the incidence and forms of "unofficial" delinquency--or the broader cultural context of the delinquent behavior. The standard design for case-focused research is to set up two groups of individuals, usually unrelated to one another in any systematic way, categorize one group as "delinquent" or "delinquent-prone" and the other as "non-delinquent", and then attempt to find personal or life-history attributes that correlate meaningfully with these two types. (See, for example--Glueck, S. and E."Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency," N. Y., 1950; Kvaraceus. "The Community and the Delinquent". N. Y., 1954; Powers and Witmer --"An Experiment in the Prevention of Delinquency" N. Y., 1951). In such studies individuals are generally considered outside of their significant social context, as mutually independent items in a measurement scale. There is need for material treating the delinquent individual as intimately involved in a network of social groupings bearing a distinctive culture and related to one another in a systematic way, and which exert a highly significant influence on his behavior.

c) Need for knowledge of "normal" behavior patterns: Very little is actually known as to what constitutes the expected or customary pattern of adolescent behavior in lowerclass communities. In consequence of this lack of knowledge behaviors are frequently categorized as "deviant" or pathological", in the context of a treatment-focused agency oriented to middleclass values that in fact constitute normal or expected behavior in the individual's community milieu. Community mental health efforts wishing to make an adequate appraisal of the extent of deviant or pathological behavior need currently lacking baseline data as to normal or conforming community behavior patterns. In addition, a wide variety of service efforts--child guidance, social casework, public health nursing, family agencies, need such baseline data in order to determine the direction of needed efforts, to formulate effective operative policy, and to guage the extent of induced change.
Financial Requirements

The primary necessity for carrying out the research described above is sufficient funds to finance the data-processing phase of the research plan. Without such funds this processing, which constitutes the core of the method, could not be undertaken, since locally available funds allocated for research cover only the salary of the present research director. Such funds would pay for necessary research assistants, clerical and secretarial help, and reproducing equipment needed for the recording and coding process. Unless funds are made available it will be impossible to subject collected material to a systematic coding process, and the great potential value of a large mass of collected data will be lost. A detailed budget for the first year of research has been worked out, and is available on request. Total operating expenses for a year's time have been estimated at approximately $14,000, the bulk of which is consumed by salaries.

Institutional Sponsorship

Boston University, through its Graduate School, has agreed to assume the administrative sponsorship of this research. The Director of Research has an appointment as Research Associate in the Boston University School of Social Work. Funds supporting research to date have been supplied by the three local charitable trust funds that support the service program. The Research Director is Dr. Walter B. Miller. He received his M.A. in Social Anthropology from the University of Chicago, his Ph.D. in Social Relations at Harvard. Past research experience includes two years with the University of Chicago Fox Indian Field Project, work with the Harvard Laboratory of Social Relations, and two years with the Harvard School of Public Health working on Social and Cultural factors affecting Public Health Practice. For the past year he has been Research Director of the Roxbury Special Youth Project, and is currently Research Associate in the Boston University School of Social Work.

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