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Intervention and Prevention Strategies to Combat Juvenile Violence from Front Line Professionals

Jessica Hart, Ph.D. and Ashley Garcia, M.S.

* This study is a smaller subset of data from a larger study entitled *Risk and Protective Factors of Juvenile Violence: Perceptions from Professionals on the Front Lines of Prevention and Intervention*

Problem

In 2017, over 41,000 juveniles were arrested nationwide for violent offenses. This is 10.1% of arrests for all ages in the United States for violent crimes (FBI, 2017). More juveniles die by homicide each year than cancer, heart disease, pneumonia, birth defects, flu, respiratory diseases, stroke, and diabetes combined (David-Ferdon & Simon, 2014).

The problem addressed in this study is the need to understand the **risk and protective factors involved in juvenile violence to develop more effective intervention and prevention strategies.**

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory, mixed method design was to identify potential risk and protective factors for violent juvenile offending through the eyes of the front line professionals in the field that interact with them.

The **independent variable** is the Professionals included law enforcement, mental health (MH) therapists, and teachers views on the resources that are needed to combat future violent juvenile offending.

The **dependent variables** are:

- Likert scale responses
- Open-ended response for top three risk factors, top three protective factors, and female specific risk and protective factors
- **Target services** compiled from previous research: Accessibility to Guns, Attitudes towards guns, Basic Needs, Bullying, Deviant Peer Influence, Early Delinquent History, Extracurricular Activities, Family Conflict, Interest, Learning Difficulties, Mental Health Disorders, Mentor, Parent Involvement Interest, Parental supervision, Pro-Social Peer Influence, School Failure, Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), Substance abuse, Teacher School Support, and Violent Video Games.

Significance

The findings of this study may

- Continue the conversation and further the research combatting juvenile violence and increasing the effectiveness of violence prevention and intervention programs,
- Provide an original contributions to the body of knowledge by seeking the guidance and expertise of the professionals who interact with juveniles the most.
- Be used to further combat juvenile violence and increase the effectiveness of violence prevention and intervention programs.
- Aid in the identification of more effective intervention and prevention programs and development of more effective intervention and prevention strategies to combat and reduce juvenile violence.

Social Change Implications

Applying their perspectives and the findings of these studies to practical community services has been the next step in combatting juvenile violence.

Meaning more effective intervention and prevention programs strategies can be developed to combat and reduce juvenile violence.

Theory or Framework

General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992; Nino et al. 2017) – suggesting that poor relationships and conditions within family, friends, school, and neighborhood can lead to increased criminal behavior.

Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) (Andrews et al., 1990, 2011) – match level of program intensity, target criminogenic needs, and match the style of intervention with the offender's learning style

Relevant Scholarship

Although extensive research has been conducted on the individual, family, school, social, and environmental risk and protective factors of violent juvenile offending by examining the lives of juvenile offenders (Bushman et al., 2016; Farrington et al., 2017; Hein et al, 2017). No one has examined these factors through the perspective of the professionals who interact with juvenile offenders the most.

Services that target parent training, improvement in individual skills, social development, and a whole systems approach have been found to be effective (Bess, 2015; Cox et al., 2017)

In addition, Denaro et al., (2017) argued for the need for use of the RNR Model to individualize treatment and interventions for juvenile offenders.

Through a combination of this focus on individualized treatment and the perspectives of professionals in the field on where to best target those services, more effective and appropriate intervention and prevention services can be developed.

Research Question

RQ1: Is there a statistically significant difference on the dependent variables by type of professional?

H₀: There is no statistically significant difference on the dependent variables by the professionals.

H_a: There is no statistically significant difference on the dependent variables by the professionals.

RQ2: What risk and prevention factors will increase the effectiveness of violence prevention and intervention programs according to law enforcement, mental health therapists, and teachers to combat juvenile violence?

Participants

A convenience sample of 208 participants (63 members of **law enforcement**, 87 **mental health therapists**, and 58 **teachers**) were surveyed from a medium size suburban city in Northeast Ohio and a large metropolitan city in Colorado.

The sample was 61.6% Female and 38.9% Male.

The age of participants ranged from 20-68, with a Mean of 40 years old.

Participants averaged 13.7 years in their profession.

Almost 60% of participants reported previous training in juvenile violence topics.

Procedures

Participants completed a survey created by the authors that was distributed either online (N=133, 63.94%) or in person (N=75, 36.06%). The survey included:

- Likert scale questions
- three open-ended questions related to their perceptions of juvenile violence
- top three choices from factors to target services of 18 compiled themes from previous research.

Analysis

Multiple (twenty-two) ANOVA's (correctional) were used to test for group differences were run in SPSS.

The open-ended questions were analyzed for themes of responses and then hand-coded in Microsoft Excel.

The list of target services categories were created from previous research and the top three choices selected by the professionals where analyzed in Microsoft Excel.

Findings

- 82.2% stated that the resources in place now are not sufficient in preventing juvenile violence
- 73.1% agreed juvenile violence is preventable
- 80.7% of the sample agreed that parents can prevent juvenile violence
- Law enforcement members were significantly less likely than teachers and therapists to believe that their community has the resources to prevent juvenile violence $F(2,205)=4.154, p = .017$.
- Law enforcement members were significant less likely than teachers and therapists to believe that violent juvenile offending will ever stop $F(2,205) = 12.566, p < .001$.
- Mental health therapists were significantly more likely than law enforcement and teachers to believe that juveniles who commit violence will also have a diagnosable mental health disorder $F(2,205) = 7.860, p = .001$.

Target Services

Top	Police	Teacher	Therapist	Overall
1	Parent Involvement Interest	Parent Involvement Interest	Parent Involvement Interest	Parent Involvement Interest
2	Social Media (Facebook Instagram etc.)	Mental Health Disorders	Mental Health Disorders	Mental Health Disorders
3	Mental Health Disorders	Substance abuse	Pro-Social Peer Influence	Social Media (Facebook Instagram etc.)
4	Parental supervision	Parental supervision	Bullying	Pro-Social Peer Influence
5	Extracurricular Activities & Substance abuse	Mentor	Extracurricular Activities	Substance abuse

Interpretation

Based on the insights of professionals, the services and resources in their local areas are not sufficient to combat juvenile violence. Their recommendations differed based on their profession, but overwhelmingly, participants in all 3 groups recommended services be targeted towards parents, including more parent involvement, parental supervision, and parent interest.

Other key areas included mental health services, restrictions and monitoring of social media, substance abuse prevention, and pro-social peers. Interestingly, law enforcement placed a greater need on targeting services towards social media than did teachers and therapists. Therapists included peer relationships, which was not a top theme mentioned by other professionals. Substance abuse was noted as a top theme by teachers, but not by law enforcement or therapists.

As a whole, while all of these factors are supported by previous research (e.g., Bushman et al., 2016; Farrington et al., 2017), the differences in the perspectives of these professionals in which factors should be the top priorities for services is noteworthy.

Limitations

Possible limitations to the study

- Unequal sample sizes.
- Survey was not normed.
- Use of a convenience sample from only 2 states.

Recommendations

- Future studies should explore parent perceptions of the resources and needs they feel would most support them in their parenting practices given that all three professional groups in the current study noted that services should be most importantly targeted at parents.
- Future studies should continue to explore the barriers in locally implementing intervention and prevention services.
- Future studies should explore these areas for targeting services based on gender, age, and ethnicity differences.
- Future studies should continue to gain valuable input from those professionals who work in the field of prevention and intervention of violent juvenile offending. Their first-hand knowledge of this population can continue to provide new perspectives of where services can be most beneficial.