



University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development

Juvenile Crime  
When Schools  
Take a Stand

## Ineffective Strategies

### *Some Common Crime Preventions Don't Work*

**B**ecause juvenile crime and delinquency are influenced by a wide range of factors, a stand alone prevention strategy with a limited focus faces long odds of working.

Despite evidence that comprehensive school-based approaches stand the best chance of curbing juvenile crime, many schools continue to embrace strategies that are limited in scope and generally ineffective.

Suspending or expelling a troublesome student are steps that, while very common, have little effect on reducing school violence.

Also, Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), the most popular school-based crime prevention program in the country, appears to do little to reduce student drug use – it's primary focus. (*See D.A.R.E. Brings Home Poor Report Card on back*).

These prevention strategies are not alone. Several others do not appear to reduce juvenile crime or result in only minimal reductions.

#### **Suspension & Expulsion**

Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions have risen in recent years. In Pennsylvania, suspensions for violence and weapon possession rose 14.8% between 1996 and 1997, and expulsions increased 34.6%, according to the state Department of Education.

The effectiveness of suspension and expulsion is suspect. No studies

demonstrate that either has a positive impact on reducing school violence.

Expulsion, in fact, sends the wrong message: that students are not wanted in school and attendance is not important. And suspension has been linked to poor grades and early drop out.

These measures also tend to be inconsistently enforced, and the severity of the punishment does not always match the severity of the offense. For example, most suspensions in U.S. schools are handed out for noncompliance and disrespect.

#### **Instructing Students**

The information campaign, the most common school-based strategy, is among the least effective at preventing drug abuse and juvenile crime.

Students are taught factual information about drugs or delinquency, what factors influence them to engage in misbehavior, and how to recognize and respond to risky situations.

Studies find that anti-drug instruction programs alone are largely ineffective, particularly those that primarily teach about drugs and their effects or that attempt to create fear over the risks associated with alcohol and drug use.

But informational approaches focused on teaching students about the social influences that promote drug use and how to resist those pressures do tend to reduce drug use, although the effects are small and short-lived without continuing education.

#### **What Doesn't Work**

- Suspension and expulsion have not proven to be effective in reducing school violence.
- Individual counseling and peer counseling of students fail to reduce drug abuse and can actually increase delinquency.
- Drug Abuse Resistance Education, a curriculum taught by police officers, fails to reduce drug abuse when the original D.A.R.E. curriculum is used.
- Instructional programs that focus on information dissemination, fear arousal, and morals fail to reduce drug abuse.

#### **Peer Counseling**

Despite their popularity, peer group counseling and other peer-led programs do not appear promising as stand-alone delinquency interventions.

Peer group counseling usually involves an adult leader guiding discussions which encourage students to recognize problems with their behavior, attitudes, and values. Studies suggest these approaches are ineffective and may even be counterproductive. Students at one high school were more delinquent, more tardy, and less attached to their parents after peer counseling.<sup>1</sup>

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## D.A.R.E. Brings Home A Poor Report Card

The most popular anti-drug program in U.S. schools has consistently received poor grades from researchers who have studied how well it reduces substance abuse.

Drug Abuse Resistance Education, D.A.R.E., is used in 70 percent of the nation's school districts and reaches as many as 25 million students. The anti-drug instructional program is also used in 44 other countries.

The full range of D.A.R.E. activities include "visitation" lessons by uniformed police officers in kindergarten through fourth grade for brief lessons on topics such as obeying laws, personal safety, and the harmful uses of drugs; a 10-week junior high program on resisting peer pressure to use drugs, making choices, managing anger, and resolving conflicts; and a 10-week senior high program on making choices and managing anger.

However, the most widely-used form of the program is the 17-week core curriculum for fifth or sixth graders. The

original core curriculum, taught by a police officer, focuses on teaching skills to recognize and resist social pressures to use drugs. It also includes lessons on decision-making skills, self-esteem, and alternatives to drugs.

D.A.R.E. has posted consistently poor marks across a number of studies.

- Several studies find that short-term effects on student drug use are nonsignificant.
- Studies looking at longer-term results fail to find that D.A.R.E.'s core curriculum reduced drug use among students.

Research suggests that instruction programs alone are not likely to reduce substance abuse or delinquency. Such programs have a better chance of contributing to crime reduction when they are included in comprehensive programs that use a range of prevention strategies.

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### Alternative Activities

Alternative programs are sometimes offered to divert youth to constructive activities, particularly during times of the day when statistics show they are most likely to get into trouble. These programs include after-school programs, community service, and recreational activities.

Questions remain about the long-term effects of such programs.

The National Structured Evaluation, which studied prevention activities initiated by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, concluded that alternative activities alone do not reduce drug use or risk factors related to drug use, but they can be effective when they are part of programs aimed at psycho-social skill development.<sup>2</sup>

### references

*This report was based on the following publications:*

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<sup>1</sup> Gottfredson, G.D. (1987). Peer group interventions to reduce the risk of delinquent behavior: A selective review and a new evaluation. *Criminology*, 25:671-714.

<sup>2</sup> Stoil, M., Hill, G., & Brounstein, P.J. (1994). The seven core strategies for ATOD prevention: Findings of the National Structured Evaluation of What is Working Well Where. Paper presented at the 12th annual meeting of the American Public Health Association, Washington, D.C.

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