Recidivism Reduction of the L.A. Sheriff’s Gang Divergence Program

The Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department Gang Diversion Team (GDT) in Carson, California is a community-based program aimed at assisting at-risk youth, gang members, and their parents by redirecting youth away from destructive behavior. The GDT has been working with at-risk youth since 2006 by providing them with mentoring, tutoring, early intervention, home and school visits, drug awareness classes, and educational field. Through the program, youth are provided opportunities to pursue a more promising, gang-free future.

Primary Objectives

Objective 1: Conduct a literature review of theories that seek to explain different criminal-etic phenomena and to gain insight into factors contributing to overall successful divergence from criminal behavior.

Objective 2: Assess factors correlated with program completion or dropout for various categories of clients.

Objective 3: Measure the overall effectiveness of program graduates in diverging from delinquent behavior in 2013-2014.

Methods/Data

This study used a longitudinal mixed methods approach to assess the GDT program between July 1st 2013 and June 30th 2014. Pre-coded data and narratives based on intake records of over 60 former GDT youth participants were used to assess risk-factors of juvenile delinquency, factors correlating to individual participants success, and overall effectiveness of the program. Factors analyzed included intake risk levels (from 1-4) given to participants when enrolled in the program and the success grade (A-F) after completion.

Intake risk levels:

Level 1: In need of minimal intervention and required little or no follow up

Level 2: Bad attendance, low grades and disobedient toward authority figures

Level 3: At-risk of being in a gang, had mental health issues, excessive truancies with failing grades, and used narcotics

Level 4: Confirmed active gang member, had an arrest record and was on or at-risk of being on probation

Closed case levels:

Level A: Participant completely turned around behavior including grades, relationship with family, and behavior. No more drug use.

Level B: Participant improved, but might still have one issue to improve on. Working on issue and could seek outside help. No need for follow-up.

Level C: Classified as “lost to follow”. Cannot contact participant after numerous attempts. Participant behavior remained the same.

Level D: No improvement or had got worse during the program. Numerous issues to work on. Might have picked up a new negative behavior.

Level F: Classified as “complete failure”. GDT made numerous attempts to provide help but participant had not changed behavior and had gotten worse during the program (arrests, drugs, attitude at home, or school, etc.)

Results

• An overwhelming majority of program participants were enrolled in GDT due to a combination of both academic and behavioral issues.

• The most common behavioral issues included defiance toward figures of authority, anger and aggression. The next most common issue for participation in the program was drug abuse. The most common drug abused was marijuana, with prescription drug abuse second most common.

• Family issues were observed in the majority of participants, including lack of positive parental, parental criminal history, familial gang or crime involvement, and history of abuse or neglect.

• Mentoring and follow-ups were the most common assistance provided, second was enrollment in PSILY classes and the least common was tutoring.

• The majority of participants entering the program were classified as Level 2 and the second most common classification was Level 3. The most common theme of closed cases was “lost to follow”.

Lessons and Observations

• Not surprisingly, a good amount of cases were closed as “lost to follow”. This does not reflect on GDT’s efforts or its overall success in assisting youth participants and their parents. Every youth that is referred to GDT is given the same amount of consideration, without concern for meeting a certain quota for “success” in order to continue receiving funding, etc.

• Some cases begin looking like a failure, but turn out to be huge success.

• Sometimes cases that appeared to be simple turned out to be either very serious or difficult to continue providing assistance and services.

• Based on a qualitative review of each participant’s case notes, I found a reoccurring trend that the parent/caregiver failed to actively assist their child in continuing the program. For example:
  - They reschedule appointments or miss rescheduled appointments, or quickly become unreachable (give false contact information and only attend appointments scheduled during initial visit).
  - The youth and/or their parents showing up unannounced seeking assistance after they had disappeared. Such youth were provided further services even though their case had been closed.

• Through my experience interning with GDT, I have realized the importance of having a program that provides assistance with no questions asked.

• Numerous times parents or collaborating partners have turned to the GDT for assistance with nowhere else to go, as the amount of resources for troubled youth and their families are scarce and desperately needed.