

Abstract

The prevention of delinquency and rehabilitation of delinquent youth has been discussed, researched, and attempted over and over again, yet more and more youth seem to be entering the justice system or returning to it. This study aims to look at prevention and rehabilitation using a different lens, the lens of social connection. In my research, I have found that positive social connection is not only helpful in the development of individuals, but is also a crucial part of one's identity and one's future. In order to not only hypothesize, but also to apply these findings, I also researched mentoring programs and the impact they can have on the prevention of and rehabilitation from delinquency when quality relationships are built. I found that mentoring programs may be a beneficial starting place and have improved academic performance and self-confidence and moderately reduced deviant behavior such as drug use and crime. However, research also indicates that mentoring programs are only slightly helpful overall, and that changes and improvements may need to happen in order for mentoring programs to have a stronger, more lasting impact.

The role of mentoring programs on the establishment of healthy relationships
and the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy said “The future promise of any nation can be directly measured by the present prospects of its youth” (Bartollas & Schmallegger, 2014). In 2010, it was estimated that one in four of the twenty five million adolescents in the United States was at high-risk of engaging in delinquent behavior, such as crime and alcohol and drug use (Bartollas & Schmallegger, 2014). In that same year, according to the Uniform Crime Report, over 1.2 million juveniles were arrested. Several studies have shown that once a youth has had contact with the juvenile justice system, the likelihood of them returning to that system, or to an adult facility, is at least 50%. A few longitudinal studies have found recidivism rates to be even higher with 85% to 90% of incarcerated youth returning to the system later as adults (Abrams, Terry, & Franke, 2011). If these are just a few of the statistics regarding delinquent behavior among youth, what does that say about the promise of this nation’s future?

Prevention and Rehabilitation Techniques

In order to combat delinquency, several techniques and treatments are being used. For at-risk youth, or those who are not yet considered delinquent, but who have certain “personal or environmental disadvantages” that may lead to them becoming delinquent, prevention strategies are used to keep them from entering the justice system (Miller, Barnes, Miller, & McKinnon, 2013). These strategies include after-school programs, mentoring, and recreational activities, and are often operated out of national organizations or run by schools, churches, or local service organizations (Miller et al., 2013). For system-involved youth, or those who are “incarcerated or under community supervision,” treatment and rehabilitation methods are used to combat

recidivism rates (Miller et al., 2012). These treatments have ranged from what some call “severe,” to what others may would say are “not tough enough.”

During the 1980s and 1990s, the media focused largely on violent juveniles which led to a “get tough” attitude within society. This called for an increase in efforts by the public and by the justice system. Sentences were enhanced for more serious juvenile offenders, a greater number of young offenders were sent to adult court systems, juvenile boot camps were created, city curfews were heavily enforced, and organizations and police teams were started to focus more on street gangs, youth violence, and youth with guns (Bartollas & Schmalleger, 2014). Although many of these methods are still used today, over time, the approach has changed. Some have begun questioning whether the “get-tough” mindset is helping or hindering rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, and many have decided that treatment needs to move in a more positive direction, with advocating of youth being the primary goal rather than punishment. This has led to things like probation and residential treatment programs, as well as restorative justice, meaning restitution, allowing the victim and community to heal as well as the offender to be reintegrated into society. Positive youth development, a new way of thinking about delinquent youth, has also been established do to the shift in treatment of young offenders. It suggests that delinquency may not be an individual action, but is rather a consequence of a youth’s environment and the treatment they have received from family, peers, and others in society. Positive youth development encourages social connection as well as autonomy, stating that if youth are treated as individuals rather than objects and have positive, encouraging relationships, they can thrive even amidst risk factors and hardship (Bartollas & Schmalleger, 2014).

I believe these positive approaches to the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents are pushing the justice system and this nation in a much better direction. Although the focus is still

on what kind of punishments should be given to young offenders, several government officials, organization directors, and many others have started to realize the importance of how delinquent youth are treated. Treatment programs are now available at several facilities, there are more options being given to juvenile delinquents, and sentencing has started to change. This, however, is just the beginning. If we want to help delinquent youth stop committing crime and start being active, meaningful members of the society, I believe it starts with healthy relationships and it starts with giving these youth a supporting community.

Theories

Relationships are a vital part of human life. People interact with and care for others every day and these relationships shape each individual's identity, characteristics, and values. Without relationships, our lives lack meaning or purpose. Without relationships, we have little to strive for.

Several theories have been developed about relationships and the ways relationships shape growth and future beliefs and actions. Attachment theory suggests that the behaviors and interactions of caregivers on a young child have an immense impact on that child's future relationships and actions. If the caregivers are uncaring or neglectful, it can negatively affect the way that child acts in the future. The acceptance-rejection theory is also related to how caregivers interact with their children. If a child feels accepted and loved by their caregivers, that child is more likely to have positive relationships with others their age and be more satisfied with life. Acceptance is also associated with empathy and helping others. However, if a child is rejected by caregivers, if they are abandoned, abused, or neglected, that child is more likely to have negative interactions with others, to care little for others feelings, and be unsatisfied with

life. The social support theory points toward the provisions that healthy relationships bring. If a child has positive relationships with others, it allows them to work on their social skills, expands their vocabulary, gives them educational support, and provides them with other interpersonal resources that may not be available without those relationships. When a child lacks healthy relationships, they may not have as much access to social and educational support, which may have negative consequences (Matz, 2014).

Other relational theories are more directly related to crime. Hirschi's social bonding theory states that when an individual has weak social bonds they are much more likely to commit crime or other deviant behavior. These weak social bonds include low emotional attachment, little involvement in family, school, or community activities, and a lack of commitment. Later, Hirschi and Gottfredson worked on another theory known as the general theory of crime. This theory suggests that crime is largely due to an individual's lack of self-control and that low self-control is directly related to "ineffective socialization" as a child (Longshore, Chang, & Messina, 2005).

Although these are just theories and not generalizable to all youth, many delinquent youth cases involve several of these negative attributes and often it is due to having few positive relationships, having several negative relationships, or a combination of the two that lead youth down a criminal path. Despite these theories and the knowledge about how relationships and treatment can impact youth and crime, very little research has been done and many of these theories have been ignored or completely thrown out as reasons for delinquency.

Purpose

Although juvenile delinquency is a problem in the United States and several preventative and rehabilitation methods are being utilized, youth arrests and recidivism rates remain high. I believe that one of the main reasons for this is that many children and adolescents lack healthy relationships and communities. Due to this limited access of positive and encouraging relationships, youth have difficulty with personal identity and finding connection and therefore resort to other means to obtain purpose and friendship, and those other means include drugs, alcohol, and crime. Recently, I have come across research that has shed a light on the social need of people and on the problems that can occur when disconnected from others. This research has given me hope that delinquent youth can be rehabilitated and that healthy relationships can and will be formed with these youth.

Whether or not having deep, meaningful relationships with others can counteract delinquency is still unknown. I plan to look into recent research on the topic and explore the link between connectivity and deviance. I also propose to investigate ways in which we can utilize programs that are already in place, specifically mentoring programs, to begin building healthy relationships with both at-risk and system-involved youth. Because mentoring programs are already working toward fostering social connection between youth and adults, and because they have become so popular recently, they are a good starting place for exploring positive relationships and deciphering what can be done to strengthen the relational aspect of mentoring programs to benefit delinquent youth.

Addiction Research and its Relation to Deviant Behavior

In the 1970s, well-known psychologist Bruce Alexander did a study on drug addiction using rats. Earlier research had been done showing that laboratory rats that were given water and water laced with morphine would choose the drugged water most of the time and quickly become addicted and die. Alexander found one large problem with this research: the rats were in a small cage, alone, with nothing to do but drink the water, so of course they would choose the morphine-laced water. In Alexander's new study, he placed some rats in isolated cages and others in a large housing unit he called "rat park." In this park there were several male and female rats, lots of food, and many things to play with. Researchers found that those in isolation drank large amounts of the drugged water, whereas in "rat park," the rats rarely chose the morphine-laced water and those who did drink it never did so in excess and it never led to harm of the rat. From this study, Alexander theorized that drugs are not what cause addiction, lack of social connection is what causes addiction. In an environment with little to no interaction with other rats, the rats drank the morphine-laced water, but in "rat park" where they had access to others and had the ability to interact, play, and mate, 0% of the rats became addicted to the drugged water (Alexander, Beyerstein, Hadaway, & Coombs, 1981).

Recently, due largely to the research done by Alexander, Johann Hari, a British writer and journalist, also began looking into the reason for addiction. Hari spoke on TED, a nonprofit organization that spreads ideas and information using short, powerful talks and videos, and titled his talk "Everything You Think You Know about Addiction is Wrong" (Hari, 2015). In his talk, Hari spoke about Alexander's previous work done on rats and how, although this cannot be generalized to humans, it does seem to be connected. He posed two incredibly important questions, asking "What if addiction is about your cage? What if addiction is an adaptation to

your environment?” This led him down the path of thinking about how people bond to others. People want to bond, they want connection, but if one cannot make a healthy bond with others, that person will likely bond to something else, something like drugs. Once a person has become what society would call an “addict,” they are often criminalized for their behavior and it is made to seem like they are the ones to blame. This often pushes the individual into seclusion, making connecting with others even more difficult. Hari suggests that this is not the way to treat addicts, nor is it at all helpful in stopping their drug use, instead it just creates an endless cycle in which more and more people become addicted and fewer and fewer people are there to love and care for them. Hari concluded his talk by saying, “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, the opposite of addiction is connection” (2015).

Following his study on addiction and rats, Bruce Alexander has continued to research addiction in society and how it is related to connectivity. Another theory he has begun to work through is the theory of dislocation. Dislocation can also be described as disconnection or isolation, but does not refer only to people who are displaced geographically. Instead, it has more to do with those who are a part of society, but who lack social involvement (Alexander, 2012).

From childhood, people explore purpose and finding their place within society. This dependence on society and community in understanding self is also known as “psychosocial integration.” Psychosocial integration allows an individual to use their relationships to gain a sense of belonging, identity, and meaning, to understand who they are and who they are not. In order for people to work together with others, but also have independence, they need psychosocial integration. If an individual lacks psychosocial integration, it can lead to dislocation, and with that, a lack of meaning or belonging (Alexander, 2012).

Once a person is dislocated, they will often do anything to find a substitute for social interaction, a substitute for identity, and often that substitute takes the form of drugs or other deviant behaviors. Addiction can be a conscious choice by the individual, but Alexander would argue that more than likely, it is a way to adapt to being dislocated. It is a way to buffer one's desperation for belonging and connection (Alexander, 2012).

What does this research on addiction and disconnection have to do with delinquency and crime? I believe it has everything to do with it. Both Bruce Alexander and Johann Hari have pointed out that disconnection is one of the primary causes of addiction. I believe the same thing can be said of delinquency and crime. When a youth or an adult lacks connection with others and struggles to find purpose due to that disconnection, they will search for purpose and for belonging in something else. That may mean drugs or alcohol, but it could also mean crime. In committing crime, one can find meaning, and among youth, crime can also lead to belonging among other delinquent youth or belonging to a gang. Disconnection leads to desperation for something more. If that "something more" is not answered with care and love from other people, it will lead to harmful behavior, behavior that is harmful to both the individual and to society.

Mentoring Programs

What is Mentoring?

Mentoring has become incredibly popular in recent years. It is estimated that there are more than five thousand current mentoring programs in the United States and that those programs are serving approximately three million youth (Miller et al., 2013). Although there is no formally recognized definition of mentoring, most mentoring programs refer to mentoring as a relationship between a child or adolescent and an older adult that offers guidance and support

as a youth develops and aims to build character and trust (Miller et al., 2013). Some mentoring programs, however, do not fall under this definition and may use peer mentors that are the same or close to the same age or may involve group mentoring in which there is one mentor with a small group of mentees or several mentors that work together with a varying number of mentees. Mentoring can also be formal or informal. Formal mentoring is typically done through an organization and matches the youth with a specific mentor. Informal mentoring, on the other hand, occurs naturally such as when a connection develops between a teacher and student or between an older family member or friend and a child (Miller et al., 2013).

Formal mentoring programs fall into two categories, site-based or community-based mentoring. Site-based mentoring is usually done by schools, religious organizations or other local service groups and usually includes both paid and volunteer mentors. Mentor-mentee relationships tend to be shorter and the activities the mentees participate in are more structured. Community-based mentoring is often much more flexible and less structured. Mentees work one-on-one with a mentor they are matched with and they often have a longer relationship with their mentor due to a recommended minimum one-year time commitment (Miller et al., 2013).

Interestingly, mentoring began with very little theoretical framework. Instead, its creation was largely due to the philosophies of social workers and other community members (Matz, 2014). Today, however, reasons to continue with mentoring have led to more theoretical views. One specific theory that many programs use is the socio-motivational theory. This theory states that there are three facets needed for mentoring to lead to positive change in youth. These facets include relatedness between the mentor and mentee, autonomy, and competence of the mentor about the program's desired outcomes. It is hypothesized that when a bond is formed between a

mentee and a mentor and that bond provides guidance as well as independence, there will be positive development in the youth (Matz, 2014).

Mentoring programs were originally created for disadvantaged youth, or those who come from broken homes, have behavioral or emotional problems, and/or have limited access to needed resources and social support (Tapia, Alarid, & Enriquez Jr., 2013). Although the majority of mentoring programs are for at-risk youth, some programs have been developed for other vulnerable populations such as disabled youth, adolescent parents, youth with incarcerated parents, and delinquent youth (Matz, 2014).

Benefits of Mentoring

In the past, social service providers have mainly focused on the problems and needs of the individuals they are trying to care for. When this happens, instead of the individuals improving, often the problems continue due to self-fulfilling prophecy. However, when the focus is placed on the individual's strengths and assets, often it allows those individuals to see themselves as capable of overcoming obstacles, developing goals for themselves, and finding the resources they need (Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015). This logic is one of the main reasons why many find mentoring appealing. Mentoring was created due to the strengths and gifts that were seen in young at-risk children and continues as one of the most positive prevention and intervention methods.

There are many other great benefits to mentoring programs. One incredibly helpful characteristic is the customizability of mentoring programs. As different needs and situations arise with youth or within a community, mentoring programs can be adjusted to accommodate and better serve their population. Due to this customizability, mentoring programs are also rather

inexpensive. Depending on the budget of the program, paid or volunteer mentors can be utilized and a wide range of activities can be done with the youth, many of which could include free or low-cost activities. Mentoring programs can also vary widely in style and extent. Some programs are intensively planned and prepared for whereas others are more natural or spontaneous. In either case, care, social interaction, and emotional support are being given. Mentoring can also take several forms such as one-on-one, group, or peer mentoring which allows for variety and for children's needs to be met in different ways (Miller et al., 2013).

Current Mentoring Programs and their Outcomes

Although there are hundreds of mentoring programs across the United States, very little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of the programs. Of the studies that have been done, findings have been both positive and mixed.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is one of the oldest and largest at-risk mentoring programs in the United States. It began in 1904 with just one mentoring facility and today has more than three hundred seventy five locations and serves more than 210,000 youth. BBBSA matches highly trained, adult volunteer mentors to mentees that are between the ages of six and eighteen. They meet at least three times each month for at least five hours a month doing activities that both the mentor and mentee have agreed on, such as sporting events, going to the park or library, or completing after-school activities together (Matz, 2014). Studies of BBBSA have found that youth who were involved in the mentoring program were 46% less likely to begin using drugs than a control group of children not in the mentoring program. They were also less likely to skip school, had better attitudes about their academics, and had better relationships with parents and peers (Cawood & Wood, 2014).

STEP UP Mentoring is a group mentoring program that works with system-involved youth, mainly those still completing probation, that are between the ages of fourteen and seventeen years old. A small group of about five to six mentees meet together with one mentor and participate in semi-structured meetings that include talking together, taking field trips, job shadowing, playing sports or games together and other activities. The main role of the mentor is to build relationships with the youth and point them to resources that will help them succeed. In the study done on this program, researchers found that self-confidence improved with the majority of teens in the program. When interviewed, several of the mentees discussed their ability to interact more positively with others and also that they felt more confident in finding the resources they needed. The participants also expressed that the STEP UP program helped them make better decisions, provided them with healthy activities they could continue doing, and improved their view of themselves and of others (Cawood & Wood, 2014)

Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring, or AIM, is a program that works with both at-risk youth and youth that have recently been released from incarceration. The AIM program includes one-on-one mentoring between a youth and a volunteer adult mentor as well as training workshops for older youth to learn certain trades and skills such as cooking, painting, and construction. Mentoring relationships in this program involve educational and social activities that work to achieve each youth's full potential. Studies on the AIM program have found that recidivism rates for those in the program were lower, at 24%, than a matched control group whose recidivism rate was at 60% (Abrams et al., 2011).

Several other studies have been done on different kinds of mentoring programs. One study investigated a peer mentoring pilot program that took place in a British juvenile detention facility. Fourteen young offenders were trained to be mentors to other youth in the facility. What

researchers found was surprising. Before the trainee mentors even had a chance to mentor other youth, they themselves were showing signs of change such as self-confidence, a belief in themselves, and better communication skills (Thomas & Buck, 2010). Another study, known as Umoja, an African word meaning “unity,” was a mentoring program targeting young African American males using African drumming. Due to the high probability of African American males ending up imprisoned, this program was designed to give African American boys social support and the opportunity for healthy development (Watson et al., 2015). The Umoja program targeted at-risk youth between the ages of eleven and nineteen years old. These youth participated in an African spir-rhythms drumming class and each youth was paired with an adult mentor. During the class the youth would learn the drumming technique and receive specific instruction from their mentor. There would also be time for discussion in which the mentees were encouraged and challenged to share their thoughts on many different topics. The primary goal of the class was not on musical skill, but was instead on overcoming anxiety, learning to communicate thoughts and feelings well, building positive relationships with mentors and other youth, and building self-confidence as they learned a new skill. Those who studied this program were unable to find a reliable relationship between the class and mentoring and positive changes in the youth. However, they were able to see improvements in the altercations the youth had in school. Whereas before they were fighting to solve and argument, after the program they were talking through arguments with others. They also had many more positive interactions with peers and , when asked, said that they felt more equipped to make good decisions (Watson et al., 2015).

Mentoring Limitations

Although mentoring programs can be used to impact at-risk and system-involved youth positively, there are still several limitations and improvements to be made. Studies have shown that mentoring programs have positive but mixed effects. Things they do help improve are academic and vocational skills, self-confidence and attitude, and interpersonal interaction and relationships. They have also been found to moderately reduce alcohol and drug use as well as delinquency. These findings, however, are not generalizable to all mentoring programs and are not conclusive in determining mentoring program effectiveness (Miller et al., 2013).

Due to the fact that youth are also exposed to many other environments, people, and activities, mentoring is difficult to study and measure, meaning that the outcomes that are found may not be due to the mentoring program alone (Matz, 2014). The desired expectations of mentoring are also largely based on faith instead of theory, giving mentoring a rough foundation to work with. This is further implicated when specific practices of the mentoring program, such as structure and goals, are ignored and only the surface level effectiveness is given attention (Miller et al., 2013).

Location is also another large difficulty. One study done worked with over one thousand mentoring programs in which all fifty states were represented and found that the majority of mentoring programs are located in urban settings (Miller et al., 2014). Very few are found in rural areas meaning that mentoring programs are not accessible to many rural youth who may also desire or need mentoring services (Cawood & Wood, 2014). At-risk and system-involved youth that can benefit from mentoring programs also tend to live in impoverished areas which may make finding adequate and relatable mentors difficult (Matz, 2014).

Suggested Improvements

There are several qualities that successful and caring mentoring programs seem to have. I believe these qualities include adequate training for mentors, a higher frequency of meetings between the mentor and mentee, longer relationship duration, specific goals for the program (Miller et al., 2014), a focus on strengths and assets (Watson et al., 2015), and quality relationships between the mentor and mentee.

In my opinion, adequate training for mentors should include thorough training before the program begins as well as trainings and meetings throughout the program to assess how the mentor is doing and to provide them with feedback and tips. Frequency and duration of the mentor-mentee relationship also needs to be a primary focus. One study recommended that the best mentoring matches meet at least four hours a month and the relationship is maintained for at least a year (Matz, 2014). I would say that more often a mentor and mentee meet and the longer that relationship endures, the more likely the youth is going to be impacted and that impact is going to last. Very few of the mentoring programs and research that I studied had a strong foundation and structure. I would suggest that in the preparation of a mentoring program, a discussion about the specific goals and values of those organizing the mentoring program needs to take place. Another critical aspect of mentoring programs needs to be a focus on each youth's strengths and abilities to contribute to relationships and the community, rather than a focus on their needs and problems. Creating quality relationships between the mentor and mentee is the most crucial part of any mentoring program. Without that bond, the need for a mentor and the ability of the youth to learn and develop from relationships is gone. In order to create quality relationships, matching mentors and mentees and making sure that the mentor is relatable to the mentee and his or her characteristics and interests is essential.

Conclusion

Relationships are one of the most crucial ways people find meaning, value, and belonging. When one lacks connection or has harmful relationships, one may also lack a sense of identity and may feel unloved or uncared for. If this persists without new relationships forming, it can lead to one searching for other ways to find meaning which may result in deviant behavior.

Youth who grow up with little to no healthy social connection may develop a poor understanding of who they are or where they belong. This most often leads to them searching for meaning in other things such as drugs, alcohol, crime, or unhealthy, harmful relationships. To prevent this and to counteract the decisions delinquent youth have already made, positive, healthy relationships need to be formed with them.

I believe we already have existing structures in place to begin forming these relationships. Mentoring programs were created out of the realization that youth need healthy, adult role models, encouragement, and connection. I believe these programs have already started to have an impact on youth and adults and have begun to change the way society thinks about preventing and rehabilitating delinquency. However, it is also my opinion that these programs need to go deeper. Improvements, changes, and continual shifts in thinking need to happen in order to develop genuine bonds between youth and adults and between communities.

Findings

Mentoring programs are an immensely popular method of prevention and rehabilitation and they do have many benefits. They were created to enhance academic performance, to reduce alcohol and drug use, to prevent violence and delinquency, to create social bonds and positive communication and interaction, and to give children opportunities to have fun, develop skills and

talents, and to increase self-confidence and belief. Many of these goals are being achieved, at least moderately, by some mentoring programs, but many have fallen short. In order to enhance both the mentor and the mentee experience, I have suggested that certain characteristics of mentoring programs need to take precedence. These include training mentors thoroughly and matching them well with youth, developing specific goals that can be measured and assessed, and building quality relationships between mentors and mentees by increasing the amount of time they spend together and finding some common interests and characteristics between them.

Future Relevance

This research on connection and its cause for deviance as well as the research done on mentoring programs is just the beginning and is by no means an answer as to what to do next. It is, however, a spark that I believe is beginning to catch fire in this world.

Connection is something every individual longs for in some way or another and yet society seems to have become increasingly disconnected recently. In completing this research, I have found a glimpse of hope. In a world full of brokenness, selfishness, and loneliness, there are some that are starting to realize that instead of isolation from all the problems of the world, people need unity. Instead of brokenness, people need completeness. Instead of selfishness, people need compassion. Instead of loneliness, people need connection. It is only through connection that this world will find meaning and it is only through connection that this world will be made whole.

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