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Research in Action

Michael J. Russell, Acting Director

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Doing Something About Children at Risk

by Eugene E. Hebert

The Children at Risk program (CAR), formerly the Strategic Intervention for High Risk Youths (SIHRY) program, reported on in the following article is being conducted in six cities. Certain elements of the program—case management, community policing, safe passages, drug-free zones, individual and family counseling—are common to all six sites. Each city, however, is unique in its needs and the ways in which it is implementing CAR. This article describes the CAR program in general and its application in Austin, Texas, in particular.

During the past 20 years the city of Austin, Texas, capital of the State, home to a great university, has experienced tremendous growth. The population of Austin's greater metropolitan area has more than doubled, reaching more than 780,000 in the 1990 census. The city has expanded outward, mostly to the south and west, and as jobs, stores, theaters, and services developed to accommodate the new, mostly young, prosperous residents, many of Austin's older, poorer neighborhoods began declining—in population and in prosperity.

On Austin's east side, ZIP Code 78702 is one area that has experienced this decline. Even as Austin's overall growth rate was soaring, the population in 78702 fell by more than 4,000 residents—a 17-percent drop—between 1980 and 1990 alone. The 1990 census identified the 78702 population as being 61.4 percent Hispanic, 31.4 percent African American. By far, the largest percentage of single mothers in Austin lives in 78702: 20 to 30 percent of

the households are headed by single women, compared to a citywide average of less than 10 percent.

The largest percentage of low-income families in Austin resides in 78702. Some 92 percent of the elementary school-age children participate in the free and reduced lunch programs in their schools. The average annual income is \$12,980; 29 percent of the households earn less than \$7,500 annually.

A large number of houses in 78702—about 15 percent—are vacant; only 47 percent of the residents own their own homes. Aging houses abound; vacant stores are boarded up; deserted houses are used by drug dealers, transients, and prostitutes. Abandoned properties are overgrown with weeds and shrubs and infested with rats and other pests. Graffiti identifying various competing youth gangs mark buildings and sidewalks throughout the area.

More violent crimes occur in 78702 than in any other area in Austin. Of the city's six police sectors, 78702 ranked highest in 1990 in incidents of rape, aggravated assault, robbery, and murder. More crimes against persons were committed in 78702 than in any other part of the city. More children between the ages of 10 and 13 were arrested and referred to juvenile court than in any other section of Austin. In 1990 the level of crime in 78702 rose 16 percent over 1989.

Yet, some families and individuals continue their effort to make their neighborhood a clean and pleasant place to live. Scattered across 78702 are homes with

fresh paint, neatly trimmed lawns, bright flowers—attractive islands in a sea of burgeoning blight.

Austin's 78702 area is one of six communities nationally where the Children at Risk program (CAR), a unique collaboration among private foundations, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), are attempting to involve neighborhood youths in a productive and comprehensive array of services that offer attractive alternatives to substance abuse, gangs, drug dealing, and other criminal behavior. The CAR project identifies at-risk adolescents in the target areas and provides a coordinated, broad range of services for these children and their families.

Private funding for CAR includes \$2.5 million from the Ford Foundation, \$1 million from the Pew Charitable Trusts, \$1.3 million from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, \$315,000 from the Prudential Foundation, \$200,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation, and \$25,000 from the Ronald McDonald Foundation. These funds have been matched by \$4.8 million in commitments from three agencies of the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs: the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). CASA (see "The CAR Program and CASA") acts as the foundations' intermediary for the program and oversees both the operational aspects and the research and evaluation parameters of this innovative private/public partnership.

The program was initially launched in 1992 in target communities in Austin; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Memphis, Tennessee; and Seattle, Washington. Operations in Newark, New Jersey, and Savannah, Georgia, began in April 1993.

Safe neighborhoods

Community policing, an integral element in the CAR safe neighborhoods strategy, includes the establishment of drug-free zones around the target schools, safe passage corridors for students to and from school, and a prominent police presence in the community. Austin's police chief, Elizabeth Watson, is a staunch proponent of community policing and, according to CAR project coordinator Lynn Walker, has been instrumental in getting the city's program off to a good start.

"Chief Watson is really big on community policing," says Walker. "She was strong on community policing in Houston and brought that philosophy with her when she came here to Austin. And when we talked to her about the CAR project she said, 'This is exactly what I want. We want the community to be empowered; we want to be able to identify what the needs of the community are and have our police go out and come up with solutions to the community's problems.'"

Sergeant Kim Nobles, who is community policing administrator for the Austin Police Department, says that the problems in 78702 will not be easily solved.

"What you have with these two schools (Kealing Junior High and Martin Junior High—the two target schools in 78702) is like the difference between night and day; they might as well be on other sides of the planet. You're looking at a predominantly Hispanic population in the Martin area and predominantly African American around Kealing. So what we've had to do, we've created *two* citizen task forces.

"The hard part is getting people to participate. We called a meeting, I think four people showed up. So we've been going around, telling people 'let us know what you want us to work on. We need the drug-free school zones and safe passages, and beyond that we'll work on whatever you want.'"

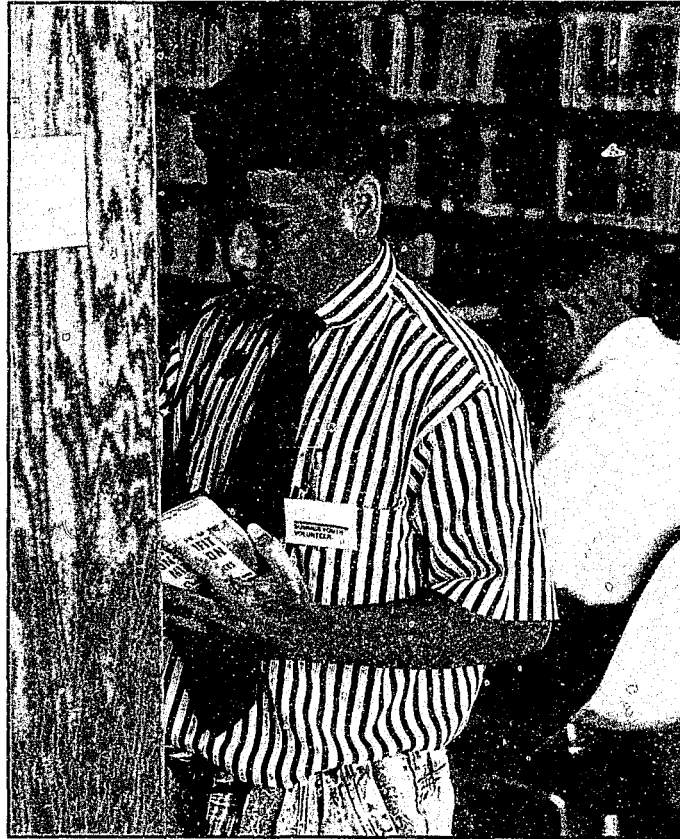


Photo by Eugene E. Hebert, NJ

In the summer of 1993, Austin's CAR program placed about 25 youngsters in the public library's summer youth program.

A CAR community task force, typically, comprises the school principal, a representative group of teachers, some parents of students in the school, and some of the students, including those in the CAR program. Working with the two task forces in 78702 are two full-time neighborhood police officers, one of whom grew up in the community.

Coordinating efforts

The CAR program, as it is being applied in Austin, has two basic components—case management and community policing. And the coordination of efforts is critical.

"I think the beauty of this project is that it focuses on the family, it's not just working on an individual," Walker says. "We focus on the family by providing comprehensive services, intervention, prevention, recreation, therapy. And the case management component interfaces with the community policing. For so long the police have performed a lot of social services; what we're doing now is bringing the two efforts together so the police are talking to the social

service providers, and they can work together instead of duplicating efforts."

Working together in the Austin CAR project are city and county agencies, the school district, and community service organizations.

"We've had programs for years for young people we considered at risk," points out Jesse Flores, executive director of Austin's Youth Advocacy Program, a community service agency. "What is different now is that with CAR we have all this coordination. *We* can concentrate on what *we* do best; the parks and recreation people can provide activities, summer programs. I think this integration of services will really make a difference."

Overseeing the cooperative effort is Dennis Campa, director of Austin's Department of Youth Services, to whom Walker reports. She, in turn, supervises the five case managers who work directly with the CAR youths and their families.

"The intent, in theory and in practice, has to do with working with the client,

The CAR Program and CASA

The Children at Risk program (CAR) aims at diverting inner-city youngsters from involvement in drugs, gangs, and crime through an intensive program of activities, including one-on-one case management, afterschool and summer programs, individual and family counseling, community policing, tutoring, mentoring, and more. Begun in 1992 in four cities, CAR has now expanded to six sites—Austin, Texas; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Memphis, Tennessee; Newark, New Jersey; Savannah, Georgia; and Seattle, Washington.

CAR represents a unique public/private partnership between agencies of the U.S. Department of Justice—specifically, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ)—and private charitable foundations.

The project was designed and is being managed by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1992 by Joseph A. Califano, Jr., former domestic adviser to President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare during the Carter Administration.

Based in New York City, the center's stated purpose is to examine the impact of substance abuse over a wide range of areas, including the Nation's work force, health care, schools, and children. CASA assembles under one roof a multidiscipline team to conduct policy research and clinical studies and develop and manage programs such as CAR.

CASA's diverse staff includes economists, health services and policy researchers, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, an anthropologist, and persons experienced

in government, the law, labor, law enforcement, and other related disciplines. CASA teams selected the four initial CAR sites, established the framework for the program, and provided technical assistance for program implementation.

CAR components

The CAR program consists of a service intervention component that includes family intervention, tutoring, afterschool and summer activities, mentoring, and incentives for participation; and a criminal justice component that includes neighborhood-based activities designed to reduce the prevalence of drug dealing and drug use. In addition, schools, service providers, police, and other criminal justice agencies collaborate at both a policy and service delivery level to provide a coordinated array of services and support for at-risk youths.

CASA site monitors visit each of the six sites once a month, following up on various issues as they arise, arranging technical assistance as needed, overseeing expenditures, and providing support to the operating organizations. CASA maintains a link with the program sites through a sophisticated research and program management information system (MIS) that contains a broad array of information on every youth in each of the six CAR programs. Each site enters its own data and can generate reports on its own program.

Technical support

Technical assistance in the area of family counseling is provided by Dr. Karol Kumpfer of the University of Utah, an expert on family programs. She works with each of the sites in assessing local program resources and identifying specific site strategies for providing family intervention services.

Through the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Institute for Law and Justice (ILJ)

provides technical assistance on community policing and the integration of law enforcement and social services. In addition, ILJ is available to conduct community training needs assessments in each city, involving police officers, case managers, and service providers.

Documentation study

The center's documentation study or process analysis is being conducted by Dr. Janice Hirota of the CASA staff. An initial report, *The Pivotal Role of Collaboration: The SIHRY Planning Grant Phase*, was completed in December 1992. Documentation products include site visit memos, which analyze site issues and contain observations on program development, and concept papers that explore major themes that arise across sites. Dr. Hirota's documentation study team is currently preparing a second paper.

Outcome evaluation

The National Institute of Justice and CASA have jointly awarded the Urban Institute a contract to conduct the outcome evaluation, with Dr. Adele Harrell as principal investigator. The evaluation will measure the program's impact on school performance, family functioning, delinquent behavior, and substance use; it will include an assessment of the effectiveness of CAR interventions with participating youngsters in comparison with other youths and their families from comparable neighborhoods in each of the four initial CAR sites. Data collection involves interviews with youths and caregivers as well as information from school and criminal justice records and CAR MIS data.

The multisite CAR project is scheduled to conclude in 1995.

persuading the children to participate in this program," Campa says. "I think the youngsters are responding pretty well so far. What surprised me was the willingness of the families to sign on. What we found when we began to recruit families was that because we picked at-risk youths, that their families were very receptive to the offer of assistance.

"I think many of the families were willing to sign on because they saw it as an opportunity for their child to get help, not realizing that for the child to get help, the parent would have to participate too. So our challenge now is finding more creative ways to engage those families in deeper forms of intervention for themselves, too."

Eligibility criteria

Obviously, not all youths—even from comparable environments and economic levels—are equally at risk for addiction and problems of welfare dependence, domestic violence, and criminality. However, early experimentation with alcohol and drugs, delinquency, family histories of

substance abuse or criminality, are indicators of a higher probability of risk.

Austin follows the general CAR guidelines for eligibility, requiring that youths satisfy both demographic requirements and at least one of the high-risk eligibility criteria. In Austin, the youths must reside in the 78702 ZIP Code area, be between the ages of 11 and 13 (though there are some 14-year-olds in the program), and attend either Keeling or Martin Junior High School.

The high-risk eligibility criteria are:

School-based factors

- Student is identified as at risk by the Austin Independent School District's guidelines.
- School behavior has resulted in disciplinary action.

Personal-based factors

- Experimentation with alcohol or drugs.
- Involvement in drug trafficking.
- Referred to juvenile court.
- Special education student.
- Pregnant, parent, or previous pregnancies.
- Abused child.
- Gang involvement.

Family-based factors

- Family members involved in the criminal justice system.
- Family history of substance abuse.
- Family member is a known gang member.
- History of family violence.

Putting CAR to work

CAR programs involve intensive case management, family intervention, after-school and summer activities, mentoring, tutoring, and so on. Afterschool and weekend programs include arts and recreation activities; sessions are held involving self-esteem building activities. Youngsters receive individual psychiatric and psychological assessments and counseling on both an individual and group basis. Family counseling sessions are held as well.



Photo by Eugene E. Hebert, NIU

CAR involves "youths in a productive and a comprehensive array of services that offer attractive alternatives to criminal behavior."

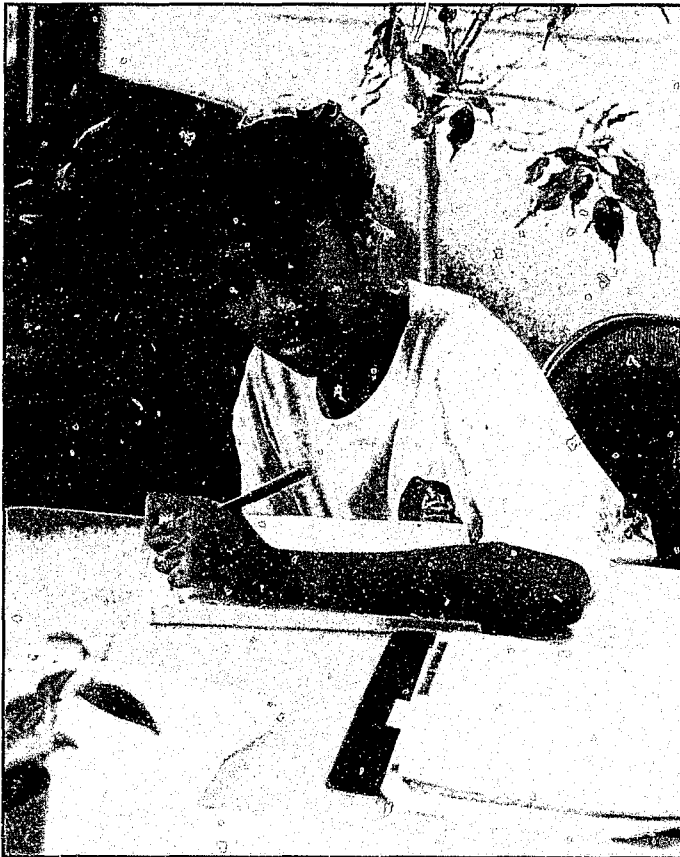


Photo by Eugene E. Hebert, NIU

As part of the CAR's program's summer jobs in the Austin library, participating youths had to go through regular job interviews.

In its first summer of operation, Austin's CAR program in 1993 involved its youngsters in a wide array of activities, ranging from nature hikes and canoe trips to museum visits and even work in the Austin city library.

"We discussed with the library people how we might get these youths involved," Walker says. "They're really too young to be employed, but the library was able to place about 25 of them in their summer youth program, and CAR is providing the children a \$20 weekly stipend for a 4-week program.

"The children had to go through interviews, they have to follow a strict dress code, and now they've been assigned jobs in the library. And these are kids that act up a lot. Actually, someone did light off a stink bomb during orientation, and we thought the whole thing would go right down the tubes. But we worked it out; the library still placed them, and they've done great.

"They've worked 3 days a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, a half day each. Then we bus them to parks and recreation for lunch, and then they either go on to an afternoon youth activity or to the Child Guidance Center for a therapy session."

Monitoring the program

The CAR case managers work directly with the youths and their families, visiting them at home, driving them about, and generally ensuring that the youngsters actually take part in the various activities. Theresa Wright is currently working with 10 youngsters; her case load will increase when the next increment of youths is admitted to the CAR program.

"We do crisis intervention, family intervention. We're advocates; I'm an advocate at school. We help the families with problems in parenting. And, of course, I help the children with social skills because that's what a lot of them are lacking.

"I meet with my kids every day. Sometimes it's me going after them, and sometimes they seek me out. There are some things they are going to come to me with that I probably wouldn't have been informed about. And there are times when they need to see me, usually when they're in trouble.

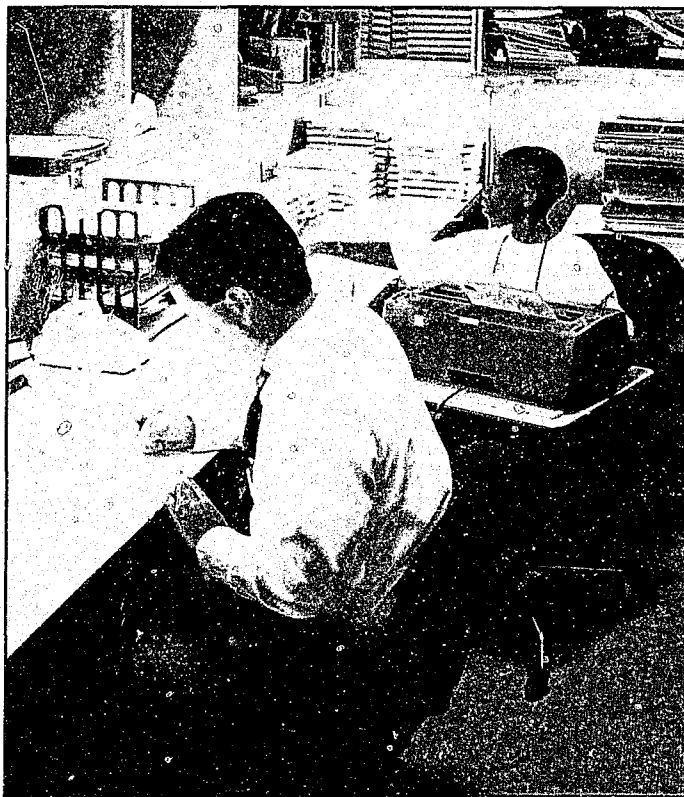


Photo by Eugene E. Hebert, NIJ

Under CAR, the children in the Austin library summer youth program worked three mornings a week and participated in either recreation activities or therapy sessions in the afternoon.

"You know, these are good kids. They haven't reached the point of real trouble yet. But there are gangs around; we're going to talk to them about the gangs, try to steer them away from getting involved. I think this program can work. I think it's important for all of us to be patient. And you have to be firm, fair but firm. They expect to be corrected; they want to be corrected."

The CAR case managers meet with Walker and representatives of child guidance every 2 weeks. Together they review school records, attendance at special activities, general behavior by the youngsters. Careful records on each youth's attendance are kept and forwarded regularly to CASA.

Evaluating the program

Although a formal outcome evaluation will be performed (see "The CAR program and CASA"), Dennis Campa informally conducts his own ongoing evaluation of Austin's CAR project every day.

"I think the expectations were that the city was receiving this large grant, and we were

going to go in and make significant differences in large parts of the community. In reality, this is a very targeted, focused program that deals with a limited number of children and families. So I think the expectations in our community, of the city council, were hard to meet.

"On the other hand, I think that what we have is something that is working. I'm very encouraged, very excited about the progress we've made starting from ground zero. I think we'll look very different a year from now; I just have to be patient."

Eugene E. Hebert is a senior writer and editor at the National Institute of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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