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HELPING DELINQUENT DROPOUTS TO COPE: AN
EVALUATION OF AN INNOVATIVE PROJECT¹

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INTRODUCTION:

The Blue Mountain Action Council of Walla Walla, Washington began its Dropout Project with the goal of reducing the juvenile justice system contacts of its participants by 50%. The key elements in this project were part-time paid work experience with accompanying training in work habits and skills, educational upgrading through tutoring, personal and vocational counseling, and an informal, down to earth, working class (as opposed to professional or middle class) organizational climate in which low income school dropouts could be at ease. The project was housed in a run-down residence located in the high poverty area from which most of the project's participants were drawn. Several key staff members in the project were older low income or working class individuals who had established stable and satisfying lives in the community but were still comfortable with youngsters from poverty backgrounds. In order to determine whether LEAA funding should be continued for a third year, the author performed an evaluation study in late 1974 after the project had been in operation for approximately two and one-half years.

A full analysis was made of all records kept at the project. Additional data were provided by interviews with availability samples of program participants, staff members, board members, parents of participants, citizens for whom work projects were completed, and past board and staff members. Finally, data on juvenile justice system contacts were evaluated using a classical control group experimental design. Because the evaluation was performed after the fact, it was impossible to randomly assign subjects to the control and experimental groups before treatment. Instead, the evaluation took the form of an ex post facto design in which subjects were matched in the past using official records and then followed into the present. Since the control group was obtained from official records, all its members were treated by the

Walla Walla County Juvenile Department. Thus, the comparison in this report is between standard and innovative treatments rather than between innovative treatment and no treatment.

RESULTS:

The quarterly progress reports made by the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project to the Law and Justice Planning Office demonstrated that the juvenile justice contacts of project participants with previous juvenile records had been reduced. More than 50% had no juvenile justice system contacts while participating in the project. By this criterion of success, the primary goal of the project was achieved. If we look carefully at these data, we note that (1) no follow-up statistics are provided, (2) the criteria for defining juvenile justice system contacts may have changed from the pre-participation period to the participation period during some reporting periods, and (3) the time at risk between pre-participation and participation differs hugely. All these factors combine to make the 50% reduction of juvenile justice system contacts a deceptive goal. Nevertheless, in terms of the goal as stated in the grant and operationalized in the quarterly reports (which were based on monthly court contact reports), the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project unquestionably achieved its primary goal.

In order to confront the issue of recidivism more directly, it was necessary to construct follow-up statistics for juvenile justice system contacts after participation in the project, to research the records of the Juvenile Court, Superior Court, Justice Court, and additional police data in order to assure comparability of the definition of a juvenile justice system contact, and to standardize the time factor by converting raw juvenile justice system contacts into rates of juvenile justice system contacts per standard time period.

The experimental group consisted of 29 young people who had partici-

pated in the work projects of the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project for a minimum of three months time (not necessarily consecutive months) between December, 1972 and November, 1974. Table 1 shows what happened to their total juvenile justice system contacts and the three sub-types of contacts, serious (felonious in adult terms), non-serious delinquencies, and dependencies. The rate of juvenile justice system contacts before beginning the project was 1.17 contacts per person per year, or 68 contacts for the entire experimental group during the two years prior to their joining the project. It is interesting to note that these 29 individuals had a total of only 12 additional official juvenile justice system contacts from birth to two years before joining the project, so that for most of them, their juvenile record was rather inactive until the age of 15.

During participation in the project, the rate of contacts with the juvenile justice system decreased steeply to 0.61 contacts per person per year, but the rate continued to decrease to 0.49 after participation in the project had ceased. Looking at the three types of contacts, we see that contacts of the dependency type (incorrigible, runaway, truancy, and no existing or capable parent) decreased from 0.36 contacts per year before participation to 0.08 contacts during and 0.00 contacts after participation; contacts of the non-serious type (shoplifting, vandalism, curfew, drinking alcohol under age, etc.) decreased from 0.60 before participation to 0.08 during and 0.23 after participation. Finally, serious contacts (assault, auto theft, burglary, etc.) increased from 0.21 before participation to 0.45 during participation, and then subsided somewhat to 0.26 contacts per person per year after terminating participation.

Table 2 compares the experimental group with the control group matched with project participants on age, sex, and previous level and

seriousness of juvenile justice system contacts. Because of the matching process, the experimental and control groups are approximately equivalent in their rates of juvenile justice system contacts during the pretest period (for the experimental group, pretest means before joining the program, for the control group, it means the period from June, 1971 to May, 1973). The posttest period (from June, 1973 to November, 1974 for the control group and a combination of the during and after participation periods for the experimental group) also showed strong similarities between the performances of the experimental and control groups. In general, both groups seemed to decrease total contact rates, and rates for dependencies and non-serious delinquencies, but this was not true for serious delinquencies.

In order to examine more precisely these changes, Table 3 was constructed. It presents the pretest-posttest changes in number of juvenile justice system contacts and changes in rates of contacts per person per year, for both the experimental and control groups. Table 3 also breaks the totals down into serious, non-serious, and dependency contacts. It is the set of percentage changes in rates that most clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project in reducing juvenile justice system contacts. Young people who participated in the project reduced their total rate of contacts by 55%, their rate of non-serious contacts by 70% and their rate of dependency contacts by 94%. In contrast, the control group experienced a decrease of 47% in total rate of contacts, 46% in the rate of non-serious contacts, and 68% in the rate of dependency contacts.

The situation for serious juvenile justice system contacts was less happy for the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project. Instead of a decrease, the experimental group of project participants showed an increase of 2 contacts, which because of the small base rate and time standardization procedure,

resulted in an increase in the rate of juvenile justice system contacts of a serious nature of 55%. This compares to a slight decrease in the rate for the control group of 5%. It should also be mentioned that this increase in serious juvenile justice system contacts for the experimental group was due almost entirely to the delinquent/criminal activities of several individuals who spent only the minimum of three months in the program during the first quarter of operation in 1973.

Table 4 looks at these data in a different way, tracing the careers of each individual in the control and experimental groups to make judgments as to whether they had improved, remained stationary, or deteriorated in their delinquent/dependency behavior. This analysis indicates that a slight majority of the cases showed improvement in both groups. The experimental group of project participants had slightly higher proportions of individuals either improving or deteriorating, and less individuals staying stationary, as compared with the control group.

In the funding application, the project set twelve objectives for itself. These objectives were intended to guide the project toward activities that would contribute to the achievement of the primary goal of reducing juvenile justice system contacts by 50%. Some of the objectives were stated clearly, such as "32 dropouts will have a paid work experience for a minimum of three months," but others were put in such a way as to make evaluation difficult or impossible. For example, "all of the participants will be given needed personal counseling" can not be easily evaluated. Where personal counseling was not used, staff members can simply state that it was not needed. As a result, only three of the objectives were clearly reached by the project. The other nine either were obviously not reached, or were stated so poorly that no intelligent evaluation was possible.

The picture presented by the interview data was amazingly consistent.

Everyone seemed to think that the project did good things, that it needed to be expanded, and that there was no other agency in the Walla Walla area that provided comparable services for dropouts. Roger Wilson, Director of the Juvenile Department, stated that the project served a special group of extremely alienated youth, youth who were alienated from their parents as well as the schools and society at large. There is some evidence that they were even alienated from each other.

The B.M.A.C. Dropout Project was a low-key operation; it was successful in taking a number of dropouts off the street and in giving some direction to their lives. A number of the participants interviewed made strong statements about the value that the project had for their personal development. Field observations supported interview data of this sort. Staff and dropouts got along well. Their relations were honest and direct. The informality of the project allowed these anti-institution youth to feel at home. The level of involvement with each other, with staff, and in the work projects was considerable. The gestalt of the dropout center was a positive and accepting one.

Interviews were done on an availability basis rather than using probability sampling. For this reason, the working papers published by the N.I.M.H. Community Drug Project, three of which were based on representative samples, are a valuable addition to this evaluation study. The first working paper (Bowker, 1974a) reported on a probability sample of adults in Walla Walla and College Place. One in every eight citizens had had some contact with B.M.A.C. staff members, though not all of these were through the Dropout Project. Of those reporting contact, 79% were positive in their opinion of the B.M.A.C. staff. This compares well with the figures for agencies serving other youth -- 67% positive for the Juvenile Department, 53% for the Mental Health Center, and 38% for the now defunct Drug Abuse Council.

A second study (Lloyd, 1974a) looked at the confidence in the B.M.A.C. staff held by members of other social service agencies in the area. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they were comfortable referring clients to all or most B.M.A.C. staff members. Confidence in the B.M.A.C. as a whole was lower than the Juvenile Department, but higher than the Mental Health Center and Drug Abuse Council.

Students in three area private schools were surveyed in the third study (Bowker, 1974b). As might be expected since these students were still in school, few had had contact with the Dropout Project. Of those who had, 87% reported a positive reaction, compared to 80% for the Mental Health Center, 57% for the Drug Abuse Council, and 50% for the Juvenile Department.

The final N.I.M.H.-sponsored paper (Lloyd, 1974b) reported on interviews with 31 dropouts, who were not selected randomly, and for that reason cannot be considered representative of all dropouts in the area. Many more dropouts had had contact with the Dropout Project than with the Mental Health Center or the Drug Abuse Council, but less than with the Juvenile Department. Two-thirds of those having contact with the Dropout Project evaluated it positively, compared to 50% for the Mental Health Center, 27% for the Juvenile Department and 0% for the Drug Abuse Council.

DISCUSSION:

What conclusions can be drawn about the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project on the basis of the control group ex post facto analysis? First, it seems that participation in the project did in fact reduce the rate as well as the absolute number of contacts with the juvenile justice system. The only exception to this was with the small number of serious offenses. The addition of the control group clarifies these relations. Dropouts who were treated by the Juvenile Department also decreased their future

contacts after their initial contacts during the pretest period. The services of the Juvenile Department were only slightly less effective than the services of the Dropout Project (47% reduction on juvenile justice system contacts as compared with a 55% reduction for the Dropout Project). The Juvenile Department was much less effective in dealing with non-serious delinquencies (46% compared to 70% reduction for the Dropout Project) and dependencies (68% compared to 94% reduction), but much more effective in dealing with serious delinquencies (5% reduction compared with a 52% increase for the Dropout Project).

Generalizing from these data, the Dropout Project was uniquely successful with moderately serious dropout-juvenile justice system cases, but not successful with the very serious cases. It was able to take alienated youth and provide them with work and counseling for short periods of time when they were between jobs, in special need of help, or wanting to earn some money for a measure of independence from their parents. Some of these youth stayed on for at least a few months and gained some educational training as well as work experience. Most important of all, the young people who came to the project rubbed shoulders with adults who accepted them (if rejecting their behavior when it was out of line) and were able to relate to them in such a way that alienation did not occur as it had in all their earlier contacts with the adult world. These youth were tough, difficult to work with, and very different from the middle-class norm.

The Dropout Project was effective with young men and women who were too alienated to be reached by the more conventional methods used by the Juvenile Department, Mental Health Center, and other social agencies. It dealt directly with their alienation and isolation by fostering a variety of social relations and work experiences, along with an educational component that was only strong during the last quarter of 1974.

It did not decriminalize them if they were heavily into crime at the felony level. The Juvenile Department was less effective with the alienated, less criminal youth, but more effective with the heavily criminal youth. Even that effectiveness was limited, since the best the Juvenile Department could do was to arrest the continued slide into increased offenses. It did not greatly reduce serious offenses either, but it was able to break to some degree the development from delinquency into hard-core adult criminality.

When there are only 29 cases in the control and experimental groups, the degree of generalizability of the findings must be considered very limited. In addition, there is no way that the matching procedures in an ex post facto design can ever hope to control for all possible relevant extraneous variables that might be influencing the outcome of the experiment. As a result of these and other methodological considerations, the conclusions based on the experimental design to evaluate more fully the goal of the project must be taken with a grain of sand. This is particularly true of the statements made about the Juvenile Department. They handle many hundreds of cases. The cases selected for analysis were based on the needs of the evaluation of the Dropout Project, and cannot be taken as representative of their caseload as a whole. For that reason, statements made about the Juvenile Department must all be seen as comparative to the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project rather than as a global evaluation of their entire operation.

There are some areas in which the project was deficient. The first was in the keeping of records. The philosophy of the director was that records interfered with the job of working with the dropouts, so they were rarely kept. Another problem was that staff turnover was so high that whatever limited records were kept were changed every few months to a different system.

It is a problem to keep detailed files on each participant. This might "turn-off" the dropouts. One way of avoiding this would be to keep better records of staff behavior, and to tie some of the objectives of the project to that staff behavior rather than to the dropouts themselves. For example, it would be possible for staff to have a tally sheet and to record each counseling session held through the day by the amount of time spent and whether the session was personal, educational, or vocational. Objectives such as requiring pretest and posttest administrations of the Career Maturity Inventory and Attitude Scale and Competence Test are more appropriate for a stationary population than for the rapidly fluctuating dropout population. A combination of records of staff behavior and statistical analyses of forms such as the work habits evaluation form, education contract, and pay sheet (all monthly) would document adequately the activities of the project. The monthly monitoring of criminal justice system contacts by the Juvenile Department is also valuable, and police reports should be added in any future use of this model.

Another problem was the supervision structure of the agency. Supervision was liberal, with little direction, few formal instructions, etc. This was in keeping with the atmosphere of the agency, which was crucial to its acceptance by dropouts, but it resulted in some staff members not understanding the structure of the grant under which the project was funded. Where there is high turnover, tighter supervision is required. In 1974, the efforts of the director were almost entirely taken up in the work projects. Interviews with dropouts suggested that this was appropriate in that it was the work experience that they valued most among the services of the project. Unfortunately, this emphasis on the details of work projects led to weakened supervision of other staff members and lowered attention to the keeping of records.

A final problem was in the area of publicity. The local newspaper gave good coverage to the project, but the average citizen in Walla Walla County did not seem to understand what the project was about. The Dropout Project adopted a low profile stance, making few enemies, but not gaining the recognition it deserved. A related and more serious problem was that the communication between many dropouts and their parents was so bad that the parents knew little of the operation of the project. More attention should have been focused on the task of making sure that all parents understood the operation of the project and the services made available to their children through it.

Where specific objectives of the project were not achieved, this was not because there were policy decisions made to abandon them. Instead, the staff of the project kept itself flexible so as to meet the needs of the constantly changing character of dropouts who passed through its doors. The objectives were ignored when they did not seem to fit, and some new staff members were not even made aware of them.

POSTSCRIPT:

Two years have passed since L.E.A.A. received the full evaluation from which this summary report is derived. Following this, the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project was funded for its final year as a demonstration project. When the demonstration grant ran out, the city and county governments neglected to fund the project and it had to close its doors. This was not a reflection of the quality of the program so much as of the priorities of local politicians and the powerlessness of the low income group served by the program.

The primary methodological value of this paper is to illustrate the difficulties in evaluating projects that serve only a small number of clients. These projects will be found in most rural areas of the nation. More powerful techniques can be used where the number of cases

and the level of funding for the evaluation are higher.

On the basis of the evaluation experience, it is recommended that the model used in Walla Walla be replicated in selected rural communities around the nation, but with a careful evaluation component built into the structure of the programs rather than tacked on afterwards. Economies of scale are always a problem in rural areas, but the low staff salaries possible in a "non-professional" program make this model an economically feasible method of diverting certain kinds of delinquents from the juvenile justice system.

References

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TABLE 1

Juvenile Justice System Contacts¹ of Participants²
in the Plus Mountain Action Council Dropout Project

Juvenile Justice System Contacts	Time Period					
	Before		During		After	
	Participation	Contacts Rate ³	Participation	Contacts Rate	Participation ⁷	Contacts Rate
Serious ⁴	12	0.21	6	0.15	8	0.26
Non-Serious ⁵	35	0.60	1	0.08	7	0.23
Dependencies ⁶	1	0.02	1	0.08	0	0.00
TOTAL	48	1.17	8	0.31	15	0.19

¹Only official contacts as recorded by the Juvenile Court, Justice Court, Superior Court, or police files were counted as contacts.

²To be counted as a participant, a young person had to be paid for a minimum of three months in the Dropout Project's work details. The months did not have to be consecutive. There were 29 participants.

³The rate of contacts was calculated on the basis of contacts per person per year at risk. The time period for the before group was two years prior to entering the program. Juvenile justice system contacts occurring before the two year limit were not considered.

⁴Serious contacts were those judged to be the equivalent of felonies, and included such contacts as those for assault, auto theft, burglary, etc.

⁵Non-serious contacts were the remaining delinquency contacts after removing the serious contacts, and included items such as shoplifting minor articles, vandalism, curfew, and drinking alcohol under age.

⁶Dependencies were those contacts listed under incorrigible, runaway, truancy, and no existing or capable parent.

⁷The after participation period varied from participant to participant, but ended with November, 1974 in all cases.

TABLE 2

Juvenile Justice System Contacts¹ of Participants² and Non-Participants³
in the Blue Mountain Action Council Dropout Project

Juvenile Justice System Contacts	Participants (Experimental Group)		Non-Participants (Control Group)	
	Contacts	Rate	Contacts	Rate
Pretest Period ⁴				
Serious ⁵	12	0.21	13	0.22
Non-Serious ⁶	35	0.60	44	0.76
Dependencies ⁷	21	0.36	16	0.28
TOTAL	68	1.17	73	1.26
Posttest Period ⁸				
Serious	14	0.32	9	0.21
Non-Serious	8	0.18	18	0.41
Dependencies	1	0.02	4	0.09
TOTAL	23	0.53 ⁹	31	0.71

¹Only official contacts as recorded by the Juvenile Court, Justice Court, Superior Court, or police files were counted as contacts. Rates are contacts per person per year.

²To be counted as a participant, a young person had to be paid for a minimum of three months in the Dropout Project's work details. The months did not have to be consecutive. There were 29 participants so designated.

³To be counted as a non-participant in the control group, young people were selected from the case files of the Juvenile Court and matched with the participants on age, sex, total juvenile justice system contacts, and serious juvenile justice system contacts, using the technique of frequency distribution matching. There were 29 individuals in the control group.

⁴The pretest period for participants was the two years prior to their joining the B.M.A.C. Dropout Project. For non-participants, it was the period from June, 1971 through May, 1973.

⁵Serious contacts were those judged to be the equivalent of felonies, and included such contacts as those for assault, auto theft and burglary.

⁶Non-serious contacts were the remaining delinquency contacts after removing the serious contacts, and included such items as shoplifting, curfew, vandalism, and drinking alcohol under age.

TABLE 2 (cont'd)

Dependencies were those contacts listed under incorrigible, runaway, truancy, and no existing or capable parent.

The posttest period consisted of the time during and after participation in the project for the experimental group, ending with November, 1974. For the control group, the posttest period was from June, 1973 through November, 1974.

Where statistics do not add perfectly, it is due to statistical rounding error.

TABLE 3

Pretest-Posttest Changes in Juvenile Justice System Contacts¹
of Participants² and Non-Participants³ in the Blue
Mountain Action Council Dropout Project

Juvenile Justice System Contacts	Participants (Experimental Group)			Non-Participants (Control Group)		
	Change In No. Of Contacts	Change In Rates	% Of Change In Rates	Change In No. Of Contacts	Change In Rates	% Of Change In Rates
Serious ⁶	2	.11	52%	4	-.01	-5%
Non-Serious ⁷	-27	-.42	-70%	-26	-.35	-46%
Dependencies ⁸	-20	-.34	-94%	-12	-.19	-68%
TOTAL	-45	-.64	-55%	-42	-.55	-47%

¹Only official contacts as recorded by the Juvenile Court, Justice Court, Superior Court, or police files were counted as contacts.

²To be counted as a participant, a young person had to be paid for a minimum of three months in the Dropout Project's work details. The months did not have to be consecutive. There were 29 participants.

³Non-participants were selected from the case files of the Juvenile Court and matched with the participants on age, sex, total juvenile justice system contacts, and serious juvenile justice system contacts. There were 29 non-participants.

⁴The rate of contacts was calculated on the basis of contacts per person per year at risk.

⁵Percentage change in rate was calculated using the pretest rate as the base line.

⁶Serious contacts were those judged to be the equivalent of felonies, such as assault, auto theft, and burglary.

⁷Non-serious contacts were the remaining delinquency contacts, including shoplifting, curfew, vandalism, and drinking alcohol under age.

⁸Dependencies were those contacts listed under incorrigible, runaway, truancy, and no existing or capable parent.

TABLE 4

Individual Changes in Juvenile Justice System Records
of Participants¹ and Non-Participants² in the
Blue Mountain Action Council Dropout Project

Individual Case Analysis	Participants (Experimental Group)	Non-Participants (Control Group)
Number of cases improving from pretest to posttest	16 (55%)	15 (52%)
Number of cases stationary from pretest to posttest	5 (17%)	8 (28%)
Number of cases deteriorating from pretest to posttest	8 (28%)	6 (21%)
TOTAL number of cases	29 (100%)	29 (101%) ³

¹To be counted as a participant, a young person had to be paid for a minimum of three - months in the Dropout Project's work details. The months did not have to be consecutive.

²Non-participants were selected from the case files of the Juvenile Court, and matched with the participants on age, sex, total juvenile justice system contacts, and serious juvenile justice system contacts.

³Where percentages do not add to 100%, it is due to rounding error.



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