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The History of Defining Youth: Current Implications for Identifying and Treating Delinquent Youth

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Abstract

This article presents a historical overview of how legally and socially constructed definitions of *childhood* and *youth* have, and continue to, shape the identification, treatment and research surrounding delinquent youth. Even though we age biologically along a continuum, formal social systems, most notably the courts and our system of rights, are based on specific chronological age parameters which impose a rigid element to something that is otherwise fluid. This often results in subjective decision making regarding sanctions and treatment options among family and criminal court systems as well as other professionals who work closely with delinquent youth. This article highlights the importance of considering more than the specific delinquent act in determining the fate of youth. Consideration of individual characteristics and environmental factors will bring us closer to a more comprehensive strategy including intervention efforts to the family and community/ neighborhood level to stimulate long term change.

Introduction

Society has not always viewed or treated children as a distinct category separate from adults. Many historians argue that the concept of *childhood* as a socially distinct category developed sometime during the seventeenth century while others suggest it may have been earlier (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Mays & Winfree, 2001). Prior to the 17th century, children were considered property. There were often non-existent or limited emotional connections to children like one would expect in families today. High infant

mortality rates and the threats of widespread disease among families made it risky for parents to attach to their children for fear the children would not live long. It was not uncommon for children to die before their fourth birthday (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Agnew, 2001). Children fortunate enough to make it past the age of six or seven were viewed as miniature adults, subject to the same laws under the 1601 Elizabethan Poor laws and the early laws of the Massachusetts Bay colony. In addition they were tried in the same courts and afforded the same sanctions as adults (Agnew, 2001; Lerman, 1977). Lying, failing to observe the Sabbath, fornicating, begging, vagrancy, idleness and gambling were all enforceable by criminal penalties for both children and adults under these set of laws (Lerman, 1977).

As Infant mortality rates began to decline by the end of the 17th century, the notion of children being *immature* and *dependent* on adults became more apparent. Increased life expectancies afforded parents more time to get to know their children and discern subtle intricacies (physically, emotionally and intellectually), that made them different from adults (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Agnew, 2001).

The Puritans of the colonial period acknowledged children as being different from adults, yet children continued to endure harsh punishment at the hands of their parents. Puritans expressed two viewpoints about the notion of childhood; (1) children were born in sin and needed to submit to adult authority and hard labor and (2) children were distinct entities from adults and in need of special legal provisions (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). According to Regoli and Hewitt (1997) Puritans made no distinction between *delinquency* and *sin*. They believed they had little choice but to remedy delinquent behavior with severe punishment for fear that their children's social evils would bring the "wrath of God upon the whole colony" (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997, p.9). Children could be put to death under the *Stubborn Child Law* of 1641(Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Mays & Winfree, 2000). The Puritans stressed that children needed direction and guidance in order to emerge as righteous, law-abiding, God fearing adults (Jensen & Rojek, 1991). Even though the concept of *childhood* was recognized during this period in history, sanctions remained extreme. Little consideration was given to the individual child in determining appropriate punishments for their behavior.

The Industrial Revolution

Major social changes in the United States throughout the 19th century forced society to re-examine the concept of *childhood* and what it meant regarding the expectations and treatment of children. The Industrial Revolution became a springboard for new social distinctions between childhood and youth, impacting the identification and treatment of youth for centuries to come. Agnew (2001) contends that the Industrial Revolution in the first part of the nineteenth century contributed to the increase in the number of families and children residing within large cities. There was a shift from a predominantly rural society to that of an urban society. Many large cities experienced influxes in their population base over a relatively short period of time. As a result, families experienced sparse housing, overcrowding, health problems, crime, dangerous labor practices, meager wages and poor environmental conditions among other social problems. In addition, children were often left unsupervised for long periods of time (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). They turned to stealing and other forms of criminal behavior as mechanisms of survival and entertainment (Agnew, 2001; Mays & Winfree, 2001). For the first time, Americans were forced to confront large numbers of homeless children from urban slums, with little or no discipline in their lives. Juvenile street gangs appeared as common fixtures in many large cities. They were physically and verbally assaultive and threatening to the public (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Their mere presence was irritating, intimidating and revolting to the privileged classes.

Early Immigration

In addition to the urbanization brought about by the industrial revolution, cities were flooded with immigrants from Europe and Asia. Most immigrants spoke little or no English, yet, their children often learned the English language and adopted the American culture as their new way of life. This acculturation brought about tension among and between families and within neighborhoods (Mays & Winfree, 2001).

The Progressive Era and the Child Saving Crusade

The Progressive Era was thought to be a significant social movement that brought us closer to the creation of a separate system of justice for children (Agnew, 2001; Mays & Winfree, 2001). The Progressive Era was marked by extensive efforts to alleviate social problems plaguing large cities as a result of industrialization and immigration. For the first time, children exposed to the dangerous working conditions and deplorable living conditions within city slums were recognized as needing additional protections (Agnew, 2001). Progressive reformers felt compelled to intervene on behalf of children in order to provide them with guidance and direction to steer them from a life of crime (Agnew 2001). A group of well intentioned, middle-class women, referred to as *Child Savers,* emerged on the scene to take on this task (Jenson & Howard, 1998). They were one of the first collective groups to acknowledge environmental and structural factors within the cities as contributors to delinquency beyond the individual maladies of the child (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). They were instrumental in lobbying for separate courts, laws and correctional facilities to address the needs of children throughout the 19th century (Agnew 2001).

Agnew (2001) outlines two disparate motivations for the child saving crusade; the first being that the middle class really had a desire to help poor, homeless, inner city children in need of guidance and direction and the second being more of a need for social control. The latter argues that middle and upper class members of society were concerned by the large numbers of poor families and wayward children roaming about the cities. They saw them as a disruptive force in society jeopardizing their privileged position in society (Agnew, 2001; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Mays & Winfree, 2001; Platt, 1974). The opposing viewpoints become important as we move through history. To no surprise, there continues to be evidence of the same competing views among the public and the various professions today.

Defining Delinquency as a Social Problem

Chambers (2000) contends that the importance of a social problem is dependent upon the power and social status of those defining it as such and the number of people it affects. Clearly, the threats felt by the upper and middle class were influential in

sparking a broad social response to delinquent behavior. Regardless of whether or not the child saving movement was a self-serving form of social action, it can be credited toward taking the preliminary steps necessary in identifying delinquency as a social problem warranting public attention and remediation.

Defining Adolescence

The growing public concern over the problem behaviors exhibited by children led to the social invention of the concept *adolescence.* This emerged as a new interim social status between childhood and adulthood (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). The concept of *adolescence* has also been referred to in the literature as *youth* or *juvenile* status which further adds to the confusion around terminology in the field of juvenile justice (Agnew, 2001; Ferdinand, 1991). According to David Bakan (as cited in Jensen & Rojek, 1998) the concept of "*adolescence*" was an American discovery linked to a prominent psychologist, Stanley G. Hall, who claimed the stage of adolescence was marked by a "lack of emotional steadiness, violent impulses, and unreasonable conduct yet, he felt this stage was one of maturation where youth could be shaped and molded into responsible adults (Jensen & Rojek, 1998, p.37). From this perspective, it is apparent that youth are a uniquely separate group, requiring special attention to their needs as they moved through this critical developmental period called adolescence (Siegel & Welsh, 2005).

Responding to Delinquent Behavior

Inevitably, the social response to the juvenile (*the actor*) shifted as early ideas of what constituted delinquent behavior (*the act*) began to transform. In order for an individual actor to be defined as delinquent, an audience must "perceive and judge the behavior in question as such" (Bynum & Thompson, 2005, p.17). The initial audience defining juvenile delinquency was upper and middle class male citizens of the major East Coast cities (Mennel, 1982, p.23).Vagrancy, pauperism, and homelessness were included among early definitions of delinquency in addition to the act of committing of petty crimes (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Platt, 1974; Lerman, 1977). Children initially identified by the Child Savers as *children in need* were now being described as "bad

seeds", capable of harming others (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Wayward children were perceived as nuisances on the streets (Ferdinand, 1991). The upper and middle class reformers believed youth needed to be controlled and kept from activities that were contradictory to social norms (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Subsequently, the upper and middle class rallied for the extension of state control to assist in controlling these children in need (Jensen & Rojek, 1998).

Early Legal Intervention

The doctrine of *parens patriae* (parent of the land) was used as the legal foundation (Jensen & Rojek, 1998) to remove delinquent children from parents and to "circumvent the rigors of criminal law by allowing courts to commit children under loosely worded statutes to specially created schools instead of jails" (Mennel, 1972, p.76). Early efforts to control the large populations of poor children engaged in idle or delinquent behavior led to their placement in factories, houses of refuge and orphanages where they were treated inhumanely and given very few freedoms (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). It was thought that placing them in these reformatories and/or apprenticeships would keep them off the streets. Reformatories operated under the guise of a better alternative to living lives of poverty and crime, yet the institutions often exposed children to more harm than good (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997).

The House of Refuge and Early Institutions

In 1825 the New York House of Refuge became the first institution specifically designed to house juvenile delinquents (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Lerman, 1977). The Founders of the New York House of Refuge made the first attempt at a correctional definition of delinquency in an effort to appeal to the public. New York legislation granted the House of Refuge the right to take in children who were considered vagrants who were convicted of criminal offenses. The specific definition included: "Boys under a certain age, who become subject to the notice of our police, either as vagrants or houseless or charged with petty crimes" (Lerman, 1977, p. 4).

Early institutions largely devoted to managing runaway and/or incorrigible children were actually prison-like schools for juvenile offenders and impoverished children (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Champion, 2004). Many of the children sent to the refuges were not only destitute and orphaned but, actually convicted felons in state and local criminal courts (Mennel, 1972). It was not uncommon for young criminals to be sent to houses of refuge before or after conviction in criminal court. Likewise, police or any "reputable citizen" had the right to place youth that were "hanging out" or "acting slovenly" (Sanborn & Salerno, 2005, p.18).

An influx in Juvenile Crime Warrants a Broader Social Response

Around the middle of the 19th century the number of juveniles charged with serious offenses in the felony court system grew substantially. Juveniles were the fastest growing component of the crime problem in larger cities. The marked increase in juvenile offenders provided the support needed for the creation of a separate system of justice for juveniles. Between 1849 and 1862 the arrest rate for juveniles rose 479% (Ferdinand, 1989). The increase over a 13 year period seems alarming. However, it may be a result of how the juvenile population was defined. History outlines the vagueness with which definitions were created. A number of factors may have contributed to the increase in the identification of juvenile offenders; (1) who were they counting? (2) How did they define *serious*? In addition, consideration should be given to the fact that the increase in number of facilities created to accommodate delinquent youth may have sparked a more ambitious effort toward identifying and confining them.

The First Juvenile Court System

In 1899 the first Juvenile Court was established in Chicago Illinois to address the growing population of delinquent youth (Sanborn & Salerno, 2005; Agnew, 2001; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). The establishment of the juvenile court was based on two premises; (1) that young people are cognitively and morally undeveloped so they cannot be considered fully responsible for their offenses and (2) they are malleable and susceptible to rehabilitation (Ainsworth, 1996). The first premise is essentially what is

referred to as *diminished capacity* which dictates by virtue of age; youth are less culpable for their acts than adults (Champion, 2001). Separate categories were created to distinguish between dependent and neglected youth in addition to the criminal delinquency classification. Under the new definitions, the state used its authority under the doctrine of *parens patriae* to act in the best interest of the child to control or remedy wayward behavior (Siegel, Welsh & Senna, 2003).

The term "best interest of the child" continues to be an underlying premise in all court proceeding involving juveniles. The problem is, it is vague and applied differentially by many players in the justice system depending on whether children are classified as dependent, delinquent or victims of neglect and/or abuse. To complicate matters, delinquent youth often have prior histories of abuse and/or neglect.

In 1946, Paul Tappan, critiqued the juvenile court system, pointing out that the constitutional rights of juveniles were ignored under the doctrine of *parens patriae* (Ferdinand, 1991). Additionally, Tappan exposed racial and gender discrimination evident throughout the system (Ferdinand, 1991). Many complained that the therapeutic philosophy of the court was not upheld. Juvenile delinquents and wayward youth continued to be detained in the same institutions with little or no treatment (Lerman, 1977). There is question today whether the juvenile court system is adhering to this premise or whether political pressure to keep communities safe has forced judges to re-examine the rehabilitative philosophy with regards to delinquent behavior (Ainsworth, 1997).

Separate Distinctions for Status Offenders Emerge

It wasn't until almost 63 years later in 1962 that New York State recognized the need to delineate among differing degrees of behavior that youth exhibited. Formal categorizations between *status offenders* and *juvenile delinquents* were created. Status offenses were defined as behaviors that were not law violations for adults, such as running away, truancy and/or incorrigibility that commonly accompanied adolescent roles (Sickmund, 2004; Yablonsky, 2000). Even though this formal distinction was a step toward recognizing levels of severity in offending behavior, it was still not unusual

for status offenders to receive the same or harsher sanctions than delinquents. They continued to be confined together for over ten years even after they were identified as separate groups with unique needs.

Public and political pressure brought about additional reform in 1971 regarding the co-mingling of status offenders and juvenile delinquents. The *In re Ellery* ruling forbade joint confinement of these two populations. One year later, the *In re Lavette* ruling, status offenders were permitted to be confined but, only in facilities specifically organized to deal with this population (Ferdinand, 1991). The distinction changed the placement and treatment options available to status offenders based on how their behavior was defined.

The identification of a status offender remains largely subjective under current statutes. Deeming a youth as a status offender is dependent upon the perception of the person observing the behavior. Although the statutes made it somewhat more clear when they added "it was not a law violation for adults," it continues to leave a great deal of discretion to parents and professionals defining persons in need of supervision (PINS) behaviors (police officers, parents, schools, etc.). Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, many states enacted similar statutes separating status offenders and delinquents by definition. This inevitable paved the way for a multitude of separate treatment options.

The Application of History to the Current Juvenile Justice System

As highlighted throughout history, the social construction of childhood and youth became the basis for justifying a separate system of justice. Therefore, the evolution of these concepts can be seen as both necessary and instrumental in the development of the current system. In terms of current practice, the vagueness surrounding terminology in the juvenile justice system continues to blur distinctions between what the law defines as delinquency and what society defines as such. As a result, the current system continues to search for the best possible options to balance the needs of youth and to ensure the safety of communities in the wake of public and political pressure.

Traditionally, the criminal justice system has been guided by a crime control model whereas, the juvenile justice system functions from a rehabilitative stance. Hence, one can see how a single system of justice, once aimed at punishing offenders regardless of age, may have had difficulty making the shift to separate systems, functioning under two distinct philosophies. An alternative vocabulary was created to further demarcate the differences between the two systems. In today's system of juvenile justice, youth are *taken into custody*, not arrested; youth are *adjudicated*, not convicted; they receive *dispositions*, not sentences; they are *placed* not incarcerated (Sanborn & Salerno, 2005). Unfortunately, the separation of the criminal justice system into two distinct systems does not guarantee the separation of beliefs, ideals and perspectives of those administering the law.

The doctrine of *parens patriae* continues to be the underlying premise by which juvenile courts function. The persistence of this doctrine is evident in the variety of dispositions available to judges today. Today, confinement is considered a last resort, not a first resort as demonstrated throughout history (Champion, 2004). Tonry and Lynch (1996) suggest shifting authority in the administration of sanctions to corrections in order to enhance services for youth. In doing so, it is suggested that intermediate sanctions will be more appropriately administered to the populations they intended to serve. As themes of "accountability" and "getting tough on youth" rear themselves again in the contemporary system, we can expect challenges to *parens patriae* philosophy under the current administration of justice (Champion, 2004). Some suggest *parens patriae* has already been in conflict and are calling for the eradication of a separate system of justice (Ainsworth, 1996).

Judges had a tremendous degree of discretion over youth prior to the 1967 *In re Gault* ruling which imposed procedural due process requirements on juvenile court cases. Ainsworth (1996) points out that although the introduction of due process rights changed the structure of the juvenile court, it is not clear how it has changed day-to-day practices among professionals interacting within the system. In today's days system it is not uncommon for youth to be assigned counsel minutes before their hearing. Counsel is therefore unprepared and unable to aggressively defend youth. Judges

almost always have prior knowledge of the juvenile's prior criminal record which creates bias in terms of the adjudication and dispositional stages. They often admit evidence that is not appropriate under the rules of evidence. Most importantly, the treatments orientation of the juvenile court makes it difficult to proceed with a fair trial (Ainsworth, 1996).

Over the past 200 years, in collaboration with other professional disciplines, we have been able to advance our understanding of the etiology of juvenile delinquency. In the past, society either focused on the specific *act* committed by the youth or on the individual characteristics of the youth as the *actor*. Very little melding of the two was apparent. Until the Industrial Revolution, little or no emphasis was given to *context* in understanding delinquency. Consideration of *context* and environment becomes critical in examining the etiology of and formulating treatment for juvenile delinquency. Examining the a*ct* of delinquency in isolation from other critical variable leads to poorly designed interventions, ineffective treatment efforts and inevitably, a punitive response.

Delinquency (The Act)

Delinquency continues to describe a broad range of illegal activities in which juveniles engage. The publics' perception of what constitutes a juvenile delinquent is often based on the extreme depictions through media and on television (Mays & Winfree, 2000; Merlos & Benekos, 2003). When trying to define delinquency, it is common for the public to conjure up mental images of events similar to the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School orchestrated by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. When events like this occur, it is difficult for the public to see past the *act*. As a result, responses to juvenile crime are often reactionary and politically charged (Merlos & Benekos, 2003). There is a tendency to pigeonhole all disruptive youth behavior (including violent and non-violent behaviors) into the category of a juvenile delinquent.

Age parameters. Setting arbitrary age markers has been one attempt to objectify socially constructed concepts, such as childhood and youth. These markers helped to set parameters with which police officers, judges, attorneys, probation officers and other legal officials can use to guide them in the decision making process around arrest, adjudication and the formulation of appropriate dispositions for youth. This is not to say

that these markers always work to their advantage. Age markers really define the maximum age a juvenile court has jurisdiction over a youth ranging from between 15 to 17. New York State is one of three states that have elected to end juvenile court jurisdiction at the age of 15. Ten states have opted to end jurisdiction at 16 and the remaining 39 have set the age of 17 as their maximum age (Sanborn & Salerno, 2005). It is not uncommon for a youth on the cusp of the maximum age of jurisdiction for his or/her state to receive little or no consequence for his/her behavior. It is not uncommon to let offenders in this category slip through the cracks in anticipation they will inevitably appear in the adult system at some point.

Judges can use discretionary powers to send a youth to criminal court based on the *act* committed. Through the use of waivers and/or blended sentencing laws, states can automatically exclude certain cases from juvenile court if they meet specific age and offense criteria (Podkopacz & Feld, 2001). This can have significant consequences for youth. The early subjective nature of waiver decisions allowed judges to make unequal rulings without appellate checks (Podkopacz & Feld, 2001). Blended sentencing options appeared to be a lesser sanction, yet one small violation of probation could revoke the juvenile disposition and invoke the concurrent criminal sentence. Most waiver and blended sentences are administered to older juveniles with felony offenses, weapons charges, and multiple out of home placements (Podkopacz & Feld, 2001). An analysis of juvenile crime statistics illustrates a spike in juvenile crime from approximately 1987 to 1994 (Baum & Katrina, 2005; Harms & Snyder, 2004; Puzzanchera, 2003). It has been reported from 1985 to 1997, the number of youth younger than 18 sentenced to adult prisons increased from 3,400 to 7,400, and the number held in state prisons increased from 2,300 to 5,400" (Merlos & Benekos, 2003; Puzzanchera, 2003 see also 2001).

The Individual Youth (The Actor)

Past victimization. Examining delinquency in terms of the *actor* helps us to understand the motivations behind their behavior and develop more appropriate interventions for long term change. It is not uncommon to uncover histories of past

neglect and abuse or other forms of victimization among delinquent youth. Loeber, Kalb and Huizinga (2001) indicate that delinquency and victimization are often intertwined and mutually stimulate each other. Their findings suggest 49% of violent, male offenders were also violently victimized (Loeber et al., 2001). In addition, repeat victimization was found to be associated with delinquency recidivism (Chang et al., 2003). In a study of juvenile detainees from a Chicago detention center, it was found that 92.5% of the youth experienced 1 or more incidents of trauma using a standardized measure of PTSD (Abram, Teplin, Charles, Longworthy, McClelland & Dulcan, 2004). This evidence supports the need to routinely assess for victimization and trauma among this population. The exploration of trauma treatment for juveniles should be regular practice. Unfortunately, the current spectrum of placement and intervention options with trained, trauma focused practitioners are limited and costly.

Gender. Gender is an important individual variable to consider when examining the delinquent as the *actor.* In terms of perpetration of juvenile crime, males continue to dominate statistics in virtually all categories. Kalb and Williams (2003) found males were more likely to have multiple arrests compared to females. In terms of victimization, females are more likely to be victims of sex crime (Finkelhor & Omrod, 2000). In addition, females are more likely to experience victimization by family members whereas males are more likely to experience victimization by peers. Therefore, gender brings a number of unique treatment elements to consider.

Historical accounts of the juvenile justice system say little about the female delinquent. The juvenile justice system still lags behind in terms of research and interventions aimed specifically at this population. Policymakers and citizens underestimate the seriousness of females in the juvenile justice system because they are statistically outnumbered by male offenders and viewed as less dangerous. As a result their needs often go unmet and services aimed at addressing past victimization (physically, emotionally and sexually) are lacking (Federal Advisory Committee of Juvenile Justice, 2004). In 2003, there were 643,000 arrests for females under the age of 18. They accounted for 24% of the juvenile arrest for aggravated assault and 32% of

other assaults. Between 1980 and 2003, juvenile arrest for simple assault increased 269% for the female population (Snyder & Howard, 2005 see also, 2004).

Richie, Tsenin and Widom (2000) examined women and girls in the criminal justice system and found a link between violence against women and their involvement in illegal activity. Warren, Hurt, Loper, Bale, Friend & Chauhun (2002) explored the psychiatric and criminological characteristics of female inmates, confirming psychological disturbances among 92%. Findings from both studies reaffirm the specific and unique characteristics of female inmates and support the need to develop earlier intervention programs aimed at young women who have been victimized, even in childhood (Richie et al., 2000; Warren et al., 2002).

Race. Race is unfortunately a strong predictor of decision making throughout the juvenile justice process. Even though law enforcement officials and social welfare workers may not be forthcoming, discrimination within the juvenile justice system is present. Race, like youth, is a socially constructed concept. It is society's attempt to divide people based on characteristics such as physical appearance, cultural affiliation, or ethnic classification. Because the concepts of both *race* and *youth* bring with them separate sets of predefined assumptions, minority youth in the juvenile justice system are at a greater disadvantage when it comes to how they are processed through the system. From arrest through disposition and treatment, officials handle minority youth differently. Players at all points of the juvenile justice system make certain assumptions based on race. Assumptions may be products of individual belief systems or they may be engrained in an organizational culture (i.e. the police precinct, welfare agency, etc.). Statistically, police arrest more minorities for serious criminal behavior than non-minorities (Rainville et al., 2003). Police are more likely to formally arrest Black youth for crimes. They are more likely to informally handle problems with white offenders. For instance, they may take them home to their parents or give them a warning (Siegel & Welsh, 2005). Allen (2005) found that the most significant predictors of a police officer taking a youth into custody were; signs of disrespect, youth that appeared "suspicious", and the age of the police officer.

The 1999 Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement found that in nearly all states, a disproportionate number of minorities were in residential placement. Although minority youth accounted for 34% of the juvenile population in the U.S., they accounted for 62% of youth in placement (Sickmund, 2004). Of the 7,135 juvenile felony defendants in 1998, 62% of them were black and 20% were white (Rainville et al., 2003). The overrepresentation of minority youth in juvenile crime statistics inaccurately reinforces to the public that these are groups to be concerned about. Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley (2002) agree that racial and ethnic disparities in violence among American cities are mostly social in nature, therefore, amenable to change. Sixty percent of the gap between whites and blacks in levels of violence is due to immigration status, residential tenure, marital status, verbal/reading ability, impulsivity and neighborhood context (Sampson, Morenoff & Earls, 1999).

The Environment (Context)

An examination of context provides insight into delinquent behavior outside of the individual youth. Research has helped us gain a better understanding of how victimization can have a profound impact on youth and influence behavior. Garbarino (1991) contends that children living in neighborhoods with community violence deal with the threat of eminent danger each day. Community violence can take place in the home, the school or in the neighborhood. The experience of community violence significantly influences children and adolescents day to day lives and has profound implications for optimal development of sociomoral reasoning, on children's understanding of justice, respect and regarding relationships in general (Kuther & Wallace, 2003).

Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley (2002) have been pioneers in conducting neighborhood research to advance our knowledge around the environmental influences of crime. The application of their research to juvenile delinquency is an important step in understanding the complex dynamics underlying delinquent behavior. Environmental context plays an important role in the opportunity for crime as well as the potential for exposure to crime. In addition, Wikstrom and Loeber (2000) found disadvantaged neighborhoods may influence well-adjusted boys to become serious

offenders as they reach adolescence. In a synthesis of literature on neighborhood effects, Sampson et al. (2002) found crime rates are related to neighborhood ties and patterns of interaction. It would seem reasonable to think interventions aimed at developing or strengthening these patterns of interaction may be a rewarding starting point.

Comprehensive Treatment Strategies for Change: Things to Consider

In terms of treatment for delinquent youth, it is critical to develop interventions that address the *act*, *actor* and *context* triad. A comprehensive approach has been difficult due to the underlying philosophies historically guiding the multiple professions involved in the treatment of juveniles. If we continue to adopt separate philosophies (crime control vs. rehabilitation), treatment and prevention efforts will continue to be ineffective and costly. The most distressing cost may be to society as these youth progress into adulthood with maladaptive social skills and a multitude of untreated mental health issues.

It is important to note that there are dynamics occurring within and between agencies that influence outcomes for youth. A youth's success or failure in the proverbial system may have little to do with their behavioral change or lack thereof. A major obstacle to providing effective treatment to youth is the inability of agencies to truly collaborate. Organizational barriers limit what agencies can work on together. Anderson, McIntyre, Rotto & Robertson (2002) identified specific elements necessary in developing systems of care for youth including; cross agency coordination, blended policies, joint funding initiatives, and clearly articulated structures for communication. Although the legal system, social service agencies, mental health organizations, and police departments may not share the same purpose (Bailey, 1999), they all agree juvenile crime is a problem. The fact still remains that we are not making a dent in juvenile crime. Our collective responsibility to youth, families and to the community should encourage systems to break down barriers in order to make the impact on juvenile crime that people have sought for centuries.

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