Intervention in juvenile delinquency: Danger of iatrogenic effects?

Mathys Cécile, Michel Born

Université de Liège, B33, Boulevard du Rectorat, 4000 Liège, Liège, Belgium

ABSTRACT

The present article reviews the literature on juvenile delinquency intervention programs with a special focus on the iatrogenic effects of such programs. Indeed, the greater the number of adolescents with the same type of problems who are grouped in the same place, the higher the likelihood that their undesirable behavioural patterns will be reinforced. We also provide evidence for a number of factors that can prevent this deviant peer contagion effect and therefore optimise the prevention or treatment measures carried out in consequence of juvenile court decisions. The most beneficial measures in juvenile delinquency matters appear to be the ones that are centred on the youths' pre-trial environments and which do not require placement in detention facilities.

Keywords: Intervention; iatrogenic effect; juvenile delinquency; deviant peers

1. INTERVENTION IN JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: DANGER OF IATROGENIC EFFECTS?

Juvenile delinquents tend to be a population that strongly resists change (Hollin, 1992), which makes their rehabilitation difficult. Without intervention, the recidivism rate for juvenile offenders is estimated to be in the 60%-80% range (Jenson & Howard, 1998). Presently, the treatment of delinquent adolescents is generally performed in group settings (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; Handwerk, Field, & Friman, 2000). Public authorities implicitly encourage this practice by the gathering together of convicted young offenders in special schools and detention facilities designed for the protection of juveniles (de Terwangne, 2006). The basic assumption underlying this type of intervention is the belief that these youths lack the ability to obtain what they desire in an appropriate manner, which leads them to commit delinquent acts. This method has had considerable success in North America (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, in press; Hawkins, Jenson, Catalano, & Wells, 1991; Le Blanc, Dionne, Proulx, Grégoire, & Trudeau Le Blanc, 1998; Lipsey, Wilson, & Cothern, 2000; Losel, 1993) and is becoming progressively more common in Europe (Born & Chevalier, 1996; Mathys, Hélin, & Born, 2008; Nas, Brugman, & Koops, 2005).

This success notwithstanding, group therapeutic procedures have not been immune from criticism. Certain iatrogenic effects have been observed in groups of adolescent delinquents in collective intervention programs, such as an increase in delinquent behavioural patterns and or a higher consumption of cigarettes or psychotropic substances (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Dodge et al., 2006; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Palinkas, Atkins, Miller, & Ferreira, 1996; Poulin, Dishion, & Burraston, 2001). This phenomenon is defined as “deviant peer contagion” in specialist literature (Bayer, Pintoff, & Pozen, 2004). Bayer et al. (2004) conclude that the exposure to peers with a similar criminal history seems likely to increase the propensity to reoffend, especially in cases of burglary, petty larceny, misdemeanor drug offences and felony sex offences. Thus, this type of intervention, by promoting contact between deviant peers, may inhibit or annul the positive effects that may have been achieved.

Affiliation with deviant peers appears to be one of the strongest correlates of juvenile delinquency (Elliot & Menard, 1996; Dodge et al., 2006; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997). This relationship may be driven by the strong social reinforcement derived from the approval of deviant behaviour by like-minded associates (Born, 2005). These statements are echoed in theories which posit a “drift into deviance,” which often results from an affiliation with deviant peers (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dishion, Spracklen, et al., 1996). Another variant of this principle is the “delinquency spiral” (Born, 2005), according to which individuals are more likely to associate with groups whose norms are similar to their own, thus favouring the reciprocal reinforcement of deviant behaviour.
The underlying basis of these theories is that adolescents who have had socialisation difficulties are more likely to perform and to encourage each other in antisocial behaviour as they lose interest in pro-social discussions or, more simply, as their antisocial actions or words receive positive reinforcement (Weiss, Caron, Ball, Tapp, Jonhnson, & Weisz, 2005). Consistent with this view is the finding by Lipseyetal. (2000) that the most efficient intervention methods for the reduction of delinquent behaviour were the ones that afforded little opportunity for deviant peers to interact with one another. Moreover, the aggregation of deviant peers decreases the positive influence of socially adjusted peers (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Dodge et al., 2006; Dishion, Spracklen et al., 1996).

2. EFFICIENCY OF INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR DELINQUENT MINORS

Several meta-analyses have been performed in this field (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 1992; Lipsey, 2006; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998; MacKensie, 2002) although the assessment of juvenile delinquency intervention measures remains uncommon and often lacks exactitude because the design is not meticulous with differences between the treatment and control groups or nonexperimental design (Greenwood, 2006). In a review of the literature, Dodge et al. (2006) suggest that individual intervention programs are more efficient than those which join delinquent adolescents. Andrews et al. (1990) propose the implementation of intervention programs adapted to the specific individual's needs. Along the same lines, Weiss et al. (2005) highlight the fact that less positive results are achieved by collective intervention programs than by individual intervention measures, a trend which applies to all types of interventions, not only programs which focus on behavioural problems.

As far as collective intervention measures are concerned, according to the meta-analysis performed by Lipsey and Wilson (1998), programs carried out at the heart of the communities-in the youths' environment-prove far more beneficial than intervention measures that involve placement in detention facilities. In particular, Greenwood (2006) identifies two mechanisms which hinder an adolescent's progress in a placement program: first, the development of the youth's negative self-image; and second, the environment in which the youth is placed and develops skills does not reflect the outside world. Furthermore, there is a higher risk of deviant peer contagion (Bayer et al., 2004; Dishion et al., 1999; Dodge et al., 2006) in placement programs than in community-based intervention measures.

On the other hand, Weiss et al. (2005) affirm that youths are more likely to develop deviant behaviour in their own social environment than in the context of a communal intervention program. These authors contend that juvenile delinquents spend little time in treatment groups relative to the amount of time spent engaged in unstructured activities with their peers, (Larson, 2001). Thus, the process of "drifting towards deviance" is not considered to be intrinsic to adolescent delinquent intervention measures, but rather it stems from the youths' unstructured social interactions.

In order to clarify these theories, this brief review of the literature concerning the positive aspects of intervention programs for delinquent adolescents has been established, comparing placement programs with community-based measures. Lipsey and Wilson (1998) demonstrate that vocational training and wilderness challenge activities-both community-based intervention measures-are non-productive for delinquent adolescents. According to Lundman (2001), such community interventions might not be able to modify the causes and risk factors underlying delinquency. On the other hand, long-term intervention programs, the involvement of intervening social factors and the organisation of interpersonal skills training activities, individual counselling, and behavioural programs seem to produce positive results. Indeed, interventions only based on negative reinforcement strategies, such as boot camps, seem to be ineffective (Feldman, 1992; McCord, 2003; Silverman & Creechan, 1995; Wilson, MacKensie & Ngo Mitchell, 2005). However, MacKensie (2002) identifies boot camps as a system which can lead to satisfying results with adolescents who are considered mildly delinquent or at an early stage of a delinquency, rather than putting these youths on a residential placement program. Dishion et al. (1999) found that a stay in a summer camp for youths at risk of becoming delinquents could be a significant predictor of future delinquency even if the boys participating in this experiment did not all demonstrate negative behavioural consequences in the follow-ups. More generally, MacKensie (2002) suggests that controlling and supervising youths in their social environment is not sufficient if these actions are not combined with an intervention program carried out by an appropriate service.

Regarding placement intervention measures, Lipsey and Wilson (1998) advocate long-term treatment programs that are well integrated in institutional practices and administered by mental-health professionals. Activities such as interpersonal skills training and the teaching family home model are beneficial. On the other hand, wilderness challenge and employment-related activities seem to be rather inefficient and more subject to deviant peer contagion. In general, Andrews et al. (1990) endorse intervention measures which focus on youths who present a high risk of delinquent behaviour, or who persist in such behavioural patterns, by specifically aiming at the risk
factors associated with delinquency, such as drug abuse or the association with deviant peers. These factors can be prone to change.

Regardless of the type of intervention measure, long-term juvenile delinquency treatment programs that include family intervention and multisystemic and cognitive-behavioural therapies, and which concentrate on factors which reinforce delinquency (e.g. drugs, alcohol, deviant peers, etc.) show greater success as far as a more stable adaptation of the adolescents and a lower recidivism rate is concerned (Tarolla, Wagner, Rabinowitz, & Tubman, 2002).

3. MODERATING AND MEDIATING FACTORS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEVIANT PEER INFLUENCE

The effect of peer contagion, which manifests itself in a drift towards deviant behaviour, has been defined as a risk factor (Greenwood, 2006), though the mediating and moderating factors underlying peer contagion are rarely analysed (Dodge et al., 2006). In order to optimise juvenile delinquency intervention measures where the collective is privileged, adolescents are regrouped in the same place, (Curry, 1991; Friman, 2000; Gibbs, Potter, Barriga, & Liau, 1996; Gold & Osgood, 1992; Milin, Coupland, Walker, & Fisher-Bloom, 2000; Pfeiffer & Strzelecki, 1990), it could be useful to consider the factors which may control or diminish the influence of deviant peers.

3.1. The presence of an adult

The first factor to consider is the presence of an experienced leader who is able to mediate the interaction between deviant peers (Dodge et al., 2006). Thus, intervention programs that involve adults (e.g. parents, group leaders, etc.) who supervise the youths during their interactions reduce the influence of deviant peers (Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000). However, the presence of an adult is not a sufficient measure, on its own, when it comes to preventing peer contagion. Indeed, the adult must structure and organize the interactions between adolescents, by a task or an activity for example (Lansford, 2006). Moreover, supervising a group of adolescents is easier if the number of adults is higher than that of the youths. With the view to improve the interventions with delinquent adolescents, the meaningful relationships between juveniles and educators can produce substantial reductions in antisocial behaviours (Handwerk et al., 2000). However, according to Buelher, Patterson, and Furniss (1966), the reinforcement ratio of peers to adults is approximately 9 to 1. Thus, when an adult in a residential setting rewarded or praised the youth one time for a pro-social action, peers praised the youth nine times for his or her deviant behaviours.

3.2. Family relations or "social control"

The adolescent's family environment is the second moderating factor. Youths at a high risk of presenting some deviant behaviours tend to increase their involvement in deviant groups and withdraw from their family, a phenomenon called "premature autonomy" (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004). Thus, a best friend's delinquency combined with a low level of parental supervision is perceived as the most powerful mediator of juvenile delinquency (Arnold & Hughes, 1999; Dishion & Granic, 2003; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Vitaro, Brengden, Pagani, Tremblay, & McDuff, 1999). Good family relationships, which consist of a strong bond to the parental figure (Farrington, 1997), the negative attitude of parents towards delinquency (Born, 2005), parents' attention to the needs and hobbies of children (Gavray & Vettenburg, 2007), and trust between parents and children (Stattin & Kerr, 2000) may limit the influence of deviant peers. Deviant behaviour goes against their values, which are the result of positive interpersonal relations and of their contact with socialisation agents. Mahoney et al. (2004) illustrate this concept by highlighting the fact that adolescents who are at high risk of performing delinquent behaviour, through extended idleness for example, are the ones who have poor relationships in both their family and school environments.

3.3. Contact with non-deviant peers

Youths tend to affiliate with other youths who have the same characteristics (Coie, Terry, Zakrisky, & Lochman, 1995). Therefore, the influence of deviant peers is greater when exerted on adolescents who are somewhat deviant or marginalized (Caprara & Zimbardo, 1996; Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997) or who have poor social relationships (Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999), whereas well-adjusted youths seem capable of resisting such influences (Dodge et al., 2006). Duncan, Boisjoly, Kremer, Levy, and Eccles (2005) highlight the fact that adolescents who do not have any behavioural problems (e.g., excessive drug use) in their school
environment are not affected by classmates who have behavioural problems. Accordingly, the drift towards deviance can be the result of a reduction of positive social interaction with non-deviant peers (Dishion, Spracklen, et al., 1996). In practice, therefore, adolescents at risk of deviant behaviour should be encouraged to associate with non-deviant peers. Thus, intervention programs that promote the development of youths' social skills should encourage interaction between adolescents of all backgrounds under adult supervision (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Feldman, 1992; Lansford, 2006; Weiss et al., 2005). Furthermore, Vitaro et al. (1997) found that the effects of deviancy training are moderated by the initial level of the youth's deviancy. Therefore, groupings of delinquent youths in residential settings may be organized according to the youths' initial level of deviancy.

In this context, there are different ways in which the presence of non-deviant peers can be advantageous in a communal intervention program. First, the non-deviant peers can participate in social skills training with deviant peers (Feldman, 1992; Mager, Milich, Harris, & Howard, 2005). This strategy is promising but the results are not conclusive, notably because the positive effects don't persist after 6 months. Moreover, there are methodological difficulties such as the composition of training groups (i.e., the ratio of non-deviant peers to deviant peers). The ideal design should compare three groups of participants: non-deviant peers, another group with deviant peers and a mixed group with deviant peers and non-deviant peers (Weiss et al., 2005). The ratio of deviant peers versus non-deviant peers in the mixed groups, the age of adolescents, and the type of intervention must be controlled. A variant of this strategy is to include non-deviant peers close to adults who supervise the social skills sessions (Kern & Kirby, 1971). The non-deviant peers are trained to intervene with deviant peers; this strategy seems better than the case in which the adult alone supervises the group (Fontaine & Vitaro, 2006).

Along these lines, Dishion, Poulin, and Berraston (2001) found that youths are less likely to engage in deviant behaviour (e.g., the consumption of tobacco) if they have a positive relationship with the peer counsellor. In this case, a peer counsellor is a youth who has him/herself had behavioural difficulties in the past and who is currently socially integrated, performs well at school, and takes part in pro-social activities. It appears that youths who experienced identical problems are more empathic with one another and can serve as a role model (Fontaine & Vitaro, 2006). These strategies can be used in the school with an aim to decrease conflicts with peers and to increase the resolution of interpersonal problems (Crary, 1992; Powell, Muir- McClain, & Halasyamani, 1995; Rousch & Hall, 1993). Another strategy with non-deviant peers is set in the community of youths. An example is involving deviant peers in pro-social activities such as sports, boy scouts or cultural activities (Guevremont, 1990). However, this strategy can isolate the deviant peers who could show some difficulties integrating themselves in the activity. Thus, improving the social skills of the deviant peers can be helpful before using this strategy (Mervis, 1985). Lastly, the presence of non-deviant peers can also be used with the case of family with the intention of supervising the contact with peers (Dishion, Bullock, & Granic, 2002; Chamberlain, 2003a,b; Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998). Treatment with a family component can be seen such as an alternative to the residential setting for the delinquent adolescents (Chamberlain, 2003a,b).

### 3.4. Structuring the interaction

The influence of non-deviant peers can also be enhanced by structuring the interaction in the frame of well-organised group activities (Larson, 2000; Lansford, 2006), including activities such as sports, shopping, outings to the cinema, youth movements, and so on. On the other hand, going to parties, driving a car without a license, and loitering with friends are not structuring activities and are often linked with deviant behaviour (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Generally, a structured activity can be defined as an activity that takes place in the presence and under the supervision of an adult at regular intervals in time, and which is beneficial for the development of adolescents' social skills and values. The participation in a structuring activity prevents momentary idleness and promotes bonds of trust between parents and children (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). The organisation of these activities seems more successful if the number of participants is limited (Greenwood, 2006).

### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The present literature review leads us to conclude that peer contagion and the associated drift towards deviance seems to be more common in groups of adolescents who present the same behavioural problems, although some data may not support this theory, based on the lack of exactitude of assessment conditions (Weiss et al., 2005), for example differences between the treatment and control groups or nonexperimental design. This factor, which has been considered very little to this date (Dodge et al., 2006) should become a major consideration when setting up juvenile delinquency intervention measures. Factors that control peer contagion and those which mediate and encourage such contagion have been highlighted, but they require further analysis. Indeed, there is
general agreement that antisocial youths tend to affiliate together, but the variables which contribute to this influence, including level of delinquency (Ferguson, Linsky, & Horwood, 1996; Frechette, & Le Blanc, 1987; Hollin, 1992; Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991; Simons, Wu, Conger, & Lorenz, 1994; Vitaro et al., 1997), deviant friends (Arnold & Hughes, 1999; Dishion & Granic, 2003; Dishion, Patterson, Capaldi et al, 1991; Eddy, & Chamberlain, 2000; Gatti et al., in press; Patterson, Reid, et al., 1992; Vitaro et al., 1997), personality (Dishion, & Patterson, 2006; Gatti et al., in press; Rothbart, & Bates, 1998), and attachment to family (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Kerr, 2008; Warr, 1993), have yet to be agreed upon. The same is true of variables associated with the context of intervention, such as the presence of adults, size of group, and type of activity (Dodge et al., 2006; Fontaine, & Vitaro, 2006). The identification of these factors will enable the optimisation of prevention or treatment programs for delinquent adolescents, and lead to more stabilised learning experiences such as social skills, moral reasoning, less cognitive distortions, etc. In order to evaluate clearly the deviancy training process, a design could combine antisocial adolescents and non antisocial adolescents within a treatment group. This would permit researchers to identify the social variables that play a role in deviancy training process.

References


