

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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### “Informing public policy with the outcomes of research-based programs”

#### THE AUTHORS

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#### THE QUESTIONS

Considering their costs, is there enough outcome evidence and to determine whether programs deserve public investment?

#### THE RESEARCH

Elizabeth Drake, Steve Aos, and Marna Miller were faced with the question –are there any evidence-based options that can reduce the future need for prison beds, save taxpayers money, and contribute to lower tax rates. In this instance, “evidence-based” describes a program or policy supported by outcome evaluations clearly demonstrating effectiveness.

Drake, Aos, and Miller found and analyzed 545 comparison group evaluations of adult corrections, juvenile corrections, and prevention programs. To be included in the actual study, the evaluation had to have a number of qualities including a control or comparison group (only 4% of the 545 qualified), and have included all clients, not just program completers. The researchers’ first step was to determine whether any program or policy demonstrated that it would lower crime. The programs were tracked for 13 years to incorporate sufficient outcome data. The second step was to determine whether the benefits of the program’s ability to reduce crime exceeded the program costs. For this second step, the costs included numerous criminal justice system requirements. The benefits were determined from two perspectives: the taxpayer and the crime victims. A US Department of Justice study was used for the cost estimates to victims based upon monetary costs of medical and mental health care expenses, reduction in future earnings, and quality of life estimates. This second step is critical because even if a program is

shown to reduce crime, it is also important that the cost of the program not exceed the benefits of that program.

A key finding of the study was that while many adult correction programs provide a favorable return on investment (in other words, they are worth funding), many of the adolescent programs are even better investments. These adolescent programs continually show greater effects on the adolescents, greater impact on reducing recidivism, and produce especially worthwhile returns on the investment. If one compares the results of the best adult program (cognitive-behavioral programs) to the best adolescent program (functional family therapy), it is clear that the adolescent program is a strong candidate. The net value of the adult program is \$15,361 per offender while the net value of the adolescent program is \$49,776 per youth.

The overall lesson from this review was that public policy makers need to be smart investors. Some programs work and deserve investment while others do not. Careful analysis is needed, and this analysis needs to inform the funding decisions of policy makers.

#### **BOTTOM LINE:**

After examining 545 adult corrections, juvenile corrections and prevention programs, these researchers found that some evidence-based programs deserve our investments. This was especially true for programs targeting adolescents.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

There is growing consensus among professionals as well as research evidence that treatment can be effective for adolescents with sexual behavior problems. Currently, treatment providers are offering a wide range of treatment program interventions, and engaging adolescents in those programs for various lengths of time. But rarely do professionals discuss the value and the cost of this work to the public. This important research with a 13-year follow-up period reinforces the need to use evidence-based programming. When such fidelity to evidence-based methods can be combined with the attributes of the therapist that have been shown to have a powerful impact on outcomes, research provides a compelling public narrative in support of evidence-based treatment interventions with adolescents.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of high-quality studies and analyses have demonstrated the positive impact of evidence-based treatment interventions with adolescents who abuse sexually. While always needing to acknowledge the small number of very violent adolescents who fall outside the scope of this perspective, there is an emerging consensus regarding the effectiveness of research-based treatment. As this particular study indicates, adolescent treatment is a cost-effective alternative to other criminal justice interventions. As public policy makers continue to debate how best to intervene with youth who abuse sexually,

we need to insist on the provision of evidence-based programming offered by compassionate client-centered therapists and argue against failed approaches that can cause harm (e.g., indiscriminate incarceration). There is little doubt that from any reasonable perspective, an investment in adolescent treatment is worth it.

#### **ABSTRACT**

In 2006, long-term forecasts indicated that Washington faced the need to construct several new prisons in the following two decades. Since new prisons are costly, the Washington legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to project whether there are “evidence-based” options that can reduce the future need for prison beds, save money for state and local taxpayers, and contribute to lower crime rates. The institute conducted a systematic review of all research evidence that could be located to determine what, if anything works to reduce crime. We found and analyzed 545 comparison-group evaluations of adult corrections, juvenile corrections, and prevention programs. We then estimated the benefits and costs of many of these evidence-based options and found that some evidence-based programs produce favorable returns on investment. This paper presents our findings and describes our meta-analytic and economic methods.

#### **CITATION**

Drake, E.K., Aos, S, & Miller, M.G. (2009). Evidence-based public policy options to reduce crime and criminal justice costs: Implications in Washington State. *Victims and Offenders*, 4, 170-196. DOI: 10.1080/15564880802612615