IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH SHOWING HARMFUL EFFECTS OF GROUP ACTIVITIES WITH ANTI-SOCIAL ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

In a classic and often-cited research article, Dishion, McCord, and Poulin (1999) present experimental evidence that delinquent adolescents who associate with anti-social peers are at increased risk of continuing and escalating delinquent behavior (*American Psychologist 1999, 54*, 755-764). These findings, and much prior and subsequent research, have led to a radical change in thinking about the organization and structure of preventive programs. Many researchers, policy-makers, and educators argue that it is harmful to group delinquent teens together in program activities. If educators adhere to this stricture, many alternative and after school programs would require dismantling, as would many prevention programs that target anti-social behavior. While all would agree that it is inadvisable to create so-called "dumping ground" programs, the common experiences and reciprocal support that anti-social adolescents can provide one another in integrated and therapeutic alternative schools and after school programs has been taken as a given by many reform-minded educators. The literature on this risk factor will be critically reviewed and recommendations will be made regarding optimal school-based strategies to avert potential iatrogenic effects of anti-social peer associations. Questions regarding mitigation of impact will be examined in terms of: the nature and quality of group activities (effective programs that use group activities will be reviewed), age (e.g., even the staunchest advocates of restricting delinquent peer interactions acknowledge that the iatrogenic effects do not pertain to pre-adolescents), generalizeability across populations, and the initial status of potentially affected youth in terms of the extent of their prior delinquent activities.

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Background and Purpose

Much progress has been made over the past 10 years in our understanding of the interpersonal dynamics underlying youth and school violence. This progress has derived from a public health orientation that elucidates risk and protective factors, longitudinal studies from which common pathways or trajectories toward violent and delinquent behavior are empirically established, and experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of theory-driven prevention and intervention programs. While we have much to learn, a substantial body of literature has accrued, fueling evidence-based recommendations about the program components that inhibit or facilitate the perpetration of aggressive and violent behavior.

One of the most widely cited risk factors for aggression and violence is deviant or anti-social peer associations (Lipsey and Derzon, 1998; Poulin and Boivin, 2000). The evidence is strong and broad that adolescents who associate with such peers are at heightened risk of subsequent engagement in aggressive and violent behavior. Calls to avoid such peer associations in prevention and intervention programs, and to promote prosocial peer associations and activities are widespread (Dishion, McCord, and Poulin, 1999; Henggeler, 1998; Herrenkohl, Huang, Kosterman, Hawkins, Castalano, and Smith, 2001; Poulin, Dishion, and Burraston, 2001).

This paper will critically review the nature, depth, and limitations of the literature that is driving the increasing aversion to using group-based components within therapeutic, prevention, and educational programs for at-risk adolescents.

> The use of the term *deviant* is abhorrent to the present author because of the implication of abnormality and possible associated stigma. Many children and adolescents who engage in delinquent and violent behavior are adapting to their circumstances in the "best" way they know to achieve status and power. Still, the term has been used throughout the literature reviewed herein and, accordingly, will be used throughout this paper.
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> *At-risk* is also short-hand term that lends itself to negatively labeling children in difficult circumstances and is again used in this paper to mirror its use in the reviewed literature.

Nature of the Evidence

The evidence of iatrogenic effects of deviant peer associations is based on cross-sectional studies, longitudinal, and experimental and quasi-experimental research designs. ["Iatrogenic" is defined as the unintended, harmful effects of a program or treatment.] Cross-sectional designs assess whether a subject's anti-social peer friendships are associated with elevated expressions of aggression or violent behavior. Longitudinal designs using causal modeling statistical techniques assess whether such associations cause or are directionally related to expressions of aggression and violent behavior; and, depending upon the variables included, mediated or moderated by other factors such as parenting style. Finally, experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations determine whether manipulation of peer associations–in this case, groupings of delinquent or antisocial peers–has a direct impact upon subsequent aggressive or violent behavior. It is only through such experimental evidence that we can determine if the impact of naturally occurring deviant peer associations are replicated through specific programmatic manipulations.

Each risk and protective factor, however, must be considered in light of a child's entire social ecology. A large body of research has delineated risk and protective factors at each social-ecological level. These risk and protective factors can and do interact, complicating any focus on a single risk factor. In other words, we need to understand the conditions and contexts under which any particular risk factor exhibits its power (Greene, 2002). The risk and protective factors for aggression and violent perpetration include those at the individual level (e.g., age, gender, attitudes, and temperament); at the family level (e.g., monitoring and supervision practices, family cohesion and discord, family structure, disciplinary and reward systems); at the peer group level (e.g., the impact of gangs, as well as peer associations); at the school level (e.g., the extent and type of aggression, level and nature of attachment to school, discipline strategies and implementation of such strategies); at the neighborhood level (e.g., levels of and exposure to violence and crime, access to drugs, and the extent of concentrated poverty, social and economic opportunities, social control, and opportunity structures); and we need to understand the impact of mores, norms, and culture at the family, peer, school, and neighborhood levels (Battin-Pearson, Thornberry, Hawkins, and Krohn, 1998; Greene, 2002; Lipsey and Derzon, 1998; McCord and Widom, 2001).

In other words, before we conclude that prevention and intervention strategies should be designed in a manner that avoids or at least minimizes deviant peer associations, we need to understand whether any of the above factors negate, mediate, or moderate peer influences (Crosnoe, Erickson, Dornbusch, 2002; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, and Skinner, 1991; Eddy and Chamberlain, 2000; Henry, Toland, and Gorman-Smith, 2001; Vitaro, Brendgen, and Tremblay, 2000). We also need to understand what types of associations produce iatrogenic effects, i.e., is it only with respect to best friends, unique versus reciprocated friendships, or the perception or actuality of deviancy among friends (Brendgen, Vitaro, and Bukowski, 2000; Cronsnoe

et al., 2002; Hayne and McHugh, 2003; Poulin and Boivin, 2000). Furthermore, we need to understand the impact of the duration and quality of such relationships, the rough mixture of deviant and prosocial peers that tips the balance, and, of course, what constitutes deviancy.

Cross-Sectional Evidence

As stated above, cross-sectional data can establish concurrent associations between predictor and criterion variables. Optimally, such studies should include other known predictors to establish the unique contribution or variance contributed by each predictor variable.

In one of the earlier studies of the relationship between deviant peer associations and aggression, Cairns and his associates found that aggressive 4th and 7th grade boys and girls tended to associate with groups of peers that were similarly aggressive, and they also named as best friends peers that were similarly aggressive (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, and Gariepy, 1988). Confirming a "birds of feather" hypothesis, this study left open the question of whether aggressive children associate with aggressive peers because of shared aggressive attitudes and behavioral patterns or whether such associations derive from a default strategy in which aggressive peers associate because they are rejected by conventional peers.

A more recent study that examined the relationship between group affiliation and self-reported violence was undertaken by Miller-Johnson and her associates (Miller-Johnson, Costanzo, Coie, Rose, Browne, and Johnson, 2003). The subjects in this study consisted of African American 7th grade boys and girls enrolled in a school-based intervention program, i.e., the subjects were at high risk of involvement in anti-social behavior. Scores on victimization and weapon carrying were significantly associated with involvement in cliques comprised of predominantly deviant peers (students who were nominated as hanging out with "peers who get into trouble)."

Haynie and McHugh (2003) studied the unique association between deviant peer friendships and self-reported delinquency among 7th to 12th graders based upon the self-rated antisocial behavior of each nominated peer. Friendships with deviant peers contributed uniquely and significantly to respondents' levels of deviancy after controlling for known individual and family predictors of deviancy. (Deviancy was measured through a consolidated score based upon cigarette use, getting drunk, skipping school without an excuse, and getting into a fight within the last 12 months.) Interestingly, among siblings, the unique friendships maintained by each sibling accounted for more variance in respondent deviancy scores than either sibling deviancy or mutually named friends, although the latter two measures also contributed significantly and uniquely to respondent deviancy.

Similarly, Prinstein and his colleagues found that among an ethnically diverse high school population, respondent scores for weapon carrying and physical fighting–after controlling for gender, grade, and number of friends–were significantly predicted by a composite score of the degree to which they maintained deviant friends (Prinstein, Boergers, and Spirito, 2001). In addition, the degree to which the respondent maintained prosocial peers was independently and negatively associated with fighting and weapon carrying. Furthermore, family dysfunction and depression increased the association between deviant peer friendships and weapon carrying and fighting, and peer social acceptance reduced the association.

Finally, Brendgen et al.(2000) examined the impact of deviant peer relations among French-Canadian male and female high school freshmen. A composite deviancy score for each subject was derived from a 25-item delinquent behavior questionnaire (including aggression, property crimes, and drug and alcohol use). The composite scores were used to assess the whether each subject's friends' composite delinquency scores was above the 80th percentile for all subjects. Subjects whose friends met the delinquency composite score

criterion were significantly more delinquent than those without such friends, as well as those without any reciprocally nominated friends.

In summary, while varying in subject population, methods of assessment, type of analytic procedures, and number and nature of co-variates examined; studies utilizing cross-sectional designs have universally revealed that among adolescents there is a strong association between delinquent and aggressive behavior and friendship patterns with deviant peers. In some studies, the degree of association was moderated by such factors as family dysfunction, prosocial peers, and depression.

Longitudinal Evidence

The first major longitudinal study of delinquency that assessed the impact of peer bonding with anti-social peers on delinquency was based on the National Youth Survey (NYS). The NYS covered a period between 1976 and 1986, utilized a multistage, cluster sampling design with youth aged 11 to 17 at time of initial sampling (Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard, 1989). Utilizing path analyses and incorporating a wide range of individual, family, peer group, school, and neighborhood variables thought to be related to problem behavior among adolescents, Elliott et al. (1989) found that delinquent peer group bonding had the strongest causal influence on delinquency. An important caveat is that the measure of deviant peer bonding was assessed "contemporaneously" with the measure of delinquency.

Another longitudinal study, conducted among 4th, 5th, and 6th grade white, French-Canadian boys, adds to our understanding of the sequence through which proactively aggressive boys come to associate with similarly proactively aggressive peers (Poulin and Boivin, 2000). The subjects were tested in the beginning and end of the academic year to assess levels of proactive aggression and peer affiliation. The reciprocally nominated friends at the beginning of the school year were more similar to one another in terms of self-rated proactive aggressive than they were to non-reciprocally nominated friends. Reciprocal friendships established during the school year also showed the same pattern, and reciprocally nominated friends at the beginning of the school year who were no longer friends at the end of the year differed in terms of initial proactive aggression scores in comparison to reciprocal friendship pairs maintained throughout the year. In addition, members of reciprocal friendships that were maintained throughout the year did not show any increase in their initial levels of proactive aggression. The findings point to a "birds of a feather" process rather than a reciprocal influence model in which children become more aggressive through interactions with aggressive peers. Still, peer influence or "deviancy training" could have sustained the aggressive behavior of reciprocally-nominated friends. Importantly, these results did not hold for students who scored high in reactive aggression.

Lipsey and Derzon (1998) synthesized the longitudinal research bearing on the prediction of violent or serious delinquency in early adulthood. They divided their analysis into early predictor variables (assessed at age 6 to 11) and later predictor variables (assessed at 12 to 14) upon delinquent and violent behavior between the ages of 15 to 25. The aggregated effect size for antisocial peers as measured at ages 6 to 11 on violence/delinquency at age 15 to 25 was ranked as the lowest among all variables studied. In other words, deviant peer associations established from age 6 to 11 do not predict subsequent involvement in delinquency or violence. In contrast, among the predictor variables measured at age 12 to 14, the mean effect size (along with social ties, which include "few social activities" and "low popularity") is the best predictor of later delinquency and violence.

Several subsequent longitudinal studies have added greatly to our understanding of the causal relationship between deviant peers in relation to aggression and violent behavior. Analyses of the longitudinal dataset from the Oregon Youth Study (OYS) have examined this question and the findings, in conjunction with experimental evidence, have been highly influential among the designers of prevention and intervention

programs (Dishion et al., 1991; Dishion et al., 1999; Henggeler, 1998; Patterson, Dishion, and Yoeger, 2000; Poulin, Dishion, and Burraston, 2001).

The OYS sample consists of 206 families that were randomly selected from high crime areas of a moderately-size metropolitan area. The sample consists primarily of white working class or unemployed families. The subjects, all males, were in the 4th grade at the time of initial recruitment. Early involvement with peers was assessed at grade 4 through a composite score based upon parent, teacher, and child reports, and a measure of unsupervised time. At grade 8 a measure of "deviancy training" was assessed. Deviance training is a composite measure comprised of: scores based on observations of the subject's interactions with his best friend (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, and Patterson, 1996); teacher, parent, child, and teacher reports of peer associations with deviant peers; and parent and child reports of unsupervised time. The outcome variable, assessed at grades 8 through 12, was number of police arrests.

The results revealed a significant causal pathway from early involvement with deviant peers to delinquency, mediated by deviancy training during adolescence (Patterson et al., 2000; for similar patterns based on the OYS dataset see Patterson, 1993 and Werner and Silberseisen, 2003). A recently published study utilizing the OYS dataset followed the subjects through their 23rd to 24th birthday. The study statistically distinguished 5 primary trajectories based upon pathways of delinquent/criminal offending (Wiesner and Capaldi, 2003). Controlling for childhood antisocial behavior, childhood and adolescent measures were included to determine which variables would reliably distinguish high-level-chronic offenders from membership in each of the other trajectories. Deviant peer associations assessed at 8th grade significantly distinguished chronic-low-level offenders and decreasing-low-level offenders from chronic high level offenders, but did not significantly distinguish high level chronic offenders from rare offenders and decreasing high level offenders. Associations with deviant peers at 4th grade were not included in the prediction model. For both groups in which deviant peer associations was significant, at least one other adolescent predictor was also significant, though none of the childhood predictors reached statistical significance. Childhood measures–attentional problems and low parental supervision–in combination with depression symptoms, risky sexual behavior, and substance use in adolescence–did significantly distinguish very-rare offenders from high-level-chronic offenders. These findings suggest that an exclusive focus on deviant peer relationships among students with the highest aggression scores in 8th grade (chronic high-level and decreasing high-level offenders) would not reliably predict which children would engage in moderate to high violence perpetration levels in early adulthood.

While the OYS data included sophisticated measures of deviant peer associations, the dataset did not distinguish between deviant peer associations related to gangs versus those that were not. When these two factors are distinguished, it appears–derived from two longitudinal studies–that while delinquent and violent offense rates are higher among youth who associate with deviant peers versus those that do not, those who are gang members have consistently higher rates of delinquency/crime than those who associate with deviant peers but are not gang members (Battin-Pearson et al., 1998).

The relationship between gang membership and associations with non-gang antisocial peers and subsequent violent offending was further explored in a multi-level, longitudinal study with a diverse population of Chicago youth, half of whom were rated as "high risk" (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, and Henry, 2003). Gang membership independently predicted violence perpetration but the relationship was strengthened (mediated) when combined with associations with non-gang violent peers. Nevertheless, positive parenting practices did reduce the adolescent's susceptibility to becoming a gang member. Parenting practices, were, in turn, affected by community structural and process characteristics.

An additional study based upon the Chicago dataset used cluster analyses to distinguish 4 types of families, based upon multiple measures and multiple sources: exceptionally functioning families, task-oriented families, struggling families, and moderately functioning families (Henry et al., 2001). The authors also

distinguished between peer associations with violent peers, non-violent but delinquent peers, and non-delinquent peers as well as a separate measure for gang membership. Adolescent violence was measured through self-report in late adolescence. Utilizing covariance structure modeling, family type significantly predicted individual violence. This relationship was, in turn, mediated through violent peer associations and gang membership (violent peer associations were also mediated through gang membership). Family functioning and association with non-violent, delinquent peers was not associated with either non-violent delinquency or individual violence. Again, the picture becomes more complicated, but in this case more sanguine with respect to the power of parents to impact the propensity to individual violence, both directly and through the suppression of violent peer associations (see also Zimmerman, Steinman, and Rowe, 1998).

Buyers and her colleagues utilizing the dataset from the Pittsburgh Youth Study (diverse sample of males) also included individual, family, peer, and neighborhood variables to predict repeated violence perpetration between the ages of 13.5 and 17.5 (Beyers, Loeber, Wikstrom, and Southamer-Loeber, 2001). Although bivariate correlations between peer delinquency and repeated violence perpetration were significant for subjects residing in high and low socioeconomic neighborhoods, the best-fitting multivariate equation for repeated violence perpetration as the criterion variable did not include peer associations for either neighborhood. This finding suggests that the impact of deviant peer associations was fully mediated through other individual and family factors, though a formal test for mediation was not conducted.

At least two studies revealed moderating effects of predictor variables on the relationship between associating with deviant peers and violent or delinquent perpetration (Frazier, Tix, and Barron, 2004). Vitaro et al.(2000), utilized an all-white French Canadian sample for whom data was collected at ages 6 through 14. With disruptive behavior at ages 6 and 10 and socio-demographic variables statistically controlled, the association with deviant peers significantly predicted subsequent delinquency perpetration. However, this relationship became non-significant among adolescents who were highly attached to their parents (with and without high parental monitoring). Similarly, for adolescents who were not disruptive at ages 6 or 10 or who were disruptive at age 6 and not at age 10, deviant peer associations were unrelated to subsequent delinquency. Finally, for those adolescents who had a negative attitude toward delinquency, deviant peer associations with subsequent delinquency were rendered non-significant.

Crosnoe and his colleagues also found moderator effects of selected variables on the relationship between deviant peer associations and subsequent delinquency (Crosnoe et al., 2002). Utilizing data from a diverse sample high school males and females in California, the researchers found a direct relationship between self-reported delinquency among peers nominated as close friends and subsequent delinquency of the target subjects, though significantly less powerfully for girls than boys. When family- and school-related indices were considered–separately for males and females–the impact of delinquent peers was reduced. Specifically, a structured household, academic achievement, and positive school attachment significantly and independently reduced the impact of deviant peer associations for male adolescents. For female adolescents, bonding with their teachers and academic achievement each significantly and independently reduced the impact of deviant peer associations.

In summary, longitudinal studies examining the relationship between deviant peer associations and subsequent aggression and violence portrays a complicated relationship. Although bivariate correlations were generally statistically significant between deviant peer associations and subsequent delinquency, the relationship between the two variables was both mediated and moderated by individual, family, and neighborhood factors. The findings suggest that for some significant portion of adolescents, peer associations with deviant peers do not play a central role in causing subsequent delinquency and violence. Furthermore, none of the longitudinal studies directly examined naturally occurring group affiliations (excluding gang membership) as distinguished from individual peer friendships, a critical concern when assessing when group components of a peer intervention are likely to have an iatrogenic impact.

Experimental Evidence

As elucidated above, experimental studies are needed to assess whether intentional manipulations that engage youth in groups do lead to the same iatrogenic effects as naturally occurring deviant peer associations. The primary question that emerges from such studies in discriminating whether an intervention strategy utilized in group interventions fails because of increased deviant peer associations that, in turn, lead to increased delinquency; or does it fail because the intervention strategy is ineffective (e.g., it is not comprehensive enough, it is too didactic, it is to proscriptive, it is not engaging, and so on). We should not, in other words, throw the baby out with the bathwater, particularly if some group interventions among high risk youth are found to be effective.

The most widely cited experimental evidence linking deviant peer associations with subsequent delinquency is based on a study of the Adolescent Transitions Program (ATP) (Dishion et al., 1999; Poulin et al., 2001). This program has 3 components (the first two consisting of 12 weekly structured sessions): a parent group utilizing a multi-modal, cognitive-behavioral approach and focusing on family management and communication skills; a teen group (generally the participants did not know one another at program commencement) focusing on behavioral regulation and peer interaction skills and also utilizing a multi-modal, cognitive behavioral approach; and a self-directed change group who received written and video-taped materials based on family and teen interventions. A matched control or assessment-only group was also created. Families, with sons or daughters ages 10 to 14 were randomly assigned to the parent-only component, the parent and teen components, or the teen-only component. Controlling for baseline levels of delinquency, the adolescents were assessed at termination, and at one, two, and three years following termination. For purposes of the analysis, the teen-only and the parent and teen groups were combined (teen groups), as were the self-directed and matched comparison group. No significant differences emerged between the groups at program termination. However, at one year post-termination, the teen groups reported significantly higher levels of delinquency, a difference that was maintained, though only at a statistical trend level ($0.05 < p < 0.10$) at two and three years post-termination.

In addition, the evaluation of Cambridge-Summerville Youth Study was cited by Dishion and his colleagues as supporting the iatrogenic hypothesis of grouping at-risk teens (Dishion et al., 1999; Poulin et al., 2001). Despite the comprehensiveness and intensity of the program and a rigorous research design, experimental evidence revealed no short- or long-term differences between the treatment group and the control group. Subsequent analyses differentiating those youth who went to summer camp and matched controls who did not, revealed that participation in summer camp seemed to have a significant and iatrogenic impact. Still, no information on the nature or group composition of the summer camp experiences (many camps were involved) could be identified. It is almost as if it were a fishing trip to identify something that could account for differential outcomes. Certainly, no one would suggest that we close down all summer camps because of their possible iatrogenic impact.

Additional evaluations of the impact of group interventions on at-risk adolescents have also shown iatrogenic effects. Poulin et al.(2001) cite two of these studies, an evaluation of a “positive peer culture program” and an evaluation of a “buddy system” among juvenile delinquents. Similarly, exclusive reliance on group counseling strategies has largely been shown to be ineffective for selected or indicated programs (Gottfredson, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Evaluations of alternative schools that group disruptive teens is inconclusive (Gottfredson, 2001). Moreover, one intervention study did detect mediational effects of family management and deviant peer associations across two group interventions (Eddy and Chamberlain, 2000). They found that the positive impact of the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care Program (a well researched and effective program for youth involved in the criminal justice system)–in relation to a group treatment intervention–was nullified or fully mediated by delinquent peer associations and family management skills. This finding lends credence to the importance of the impact

of deviant peer associations, though in a technical sense, the basis for this determination is not experimental in that the variables in question were not systemically manipulated.

The question them remains of whether there are examples of well-controlled studies of programs adopting a grouping component among high risk youth that yields a positive impact on delinquency or violence. If this cannot be demonstrated, then caution would dictate that we abandon homologous grouping of such adolescents. Several studies and several programs do in fact demonstrate that group interventions can work, even with highly at-risk adolescent populations.

First, an examination of programs selected as "blueprints" by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence are examined (Mihalic, Irwin, Elliott, Fagan, and Hansen, 2001). The three programs targeting very high-risk youth–Multisystemic Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care–each scrupulously avoids grouping adolescents, focusing on family and individual efforts (Henggeler, 1998; Chamberlain, 1998; Alexander, Pugh, Parsons, and Sexton, 2000). One program, Life Skills Training, though designed as a universal or primary substance prevention program for middle school youth, has recently been demonstrated effective for use among high risk youth (Griffin, Botvin, Nichols, and Doyle, 2002). The program is implemented as a group-based program exclusively in middle school classrooms. The focus of the program is on teaching drug refusal skills, antidrug norms, personal self-management skills, and general social skills. The orientation of the program is cognitive behavioral and an array of teaching techniques are utilized. The students were all drawn from New York City middle schools and were identified at high risk if they had friends who smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol and had poor academic achievement. Fifty-eight percent of the identified sample was African American and 29 percent was Latino. Sixty-one percent received free lunch at schools. Randomization occurred at the school level to avoid contamination effects. Controlling for relevant co-variates, at one year follow-up, high risk youth in the treatment group scored significantly better than the control group for alcohol, tobacco, inhalant, and polydrug use. Similarly, the newest identified blueprint program–Project Towards No Drug Abuse–has demonstrated effectiveness in three experimental studies for high school students at risk for substance use (Sussman, Dent, and Stacy, 2002). This program is implemented as 12 interactive classroom sessions, utilizing multimodal teaching techniques, and has been shown to reduce substance use and weapon-carrying with a limited impact on reducing violence (Simon, Sussman, Dahlberg, and Dent, 2002). Still, we do not know whether this program suppresses the negative effects of naturally occurring deviant peer associations.

Several programs designated by the Center for the Prevention of Violence as "promising" also utilize group components to achieve reductions in delinquency, violence, and substance abuse. Preventive Intervention is a two-year intervention commencing in 7th grade for students who have low academic motivation, family problems, or frequent or serious school discipline referrals (Bry, 1982). This is a multi-component program that includes weekly meetings with 3 to 5 target youth. The program has demonstrated short- and long-term reductions in self-reported delinquency, drug abuse, and school-related problems. Additional programs designated as promising, focusing on high risk middle or high school youth, and employing at least one group component with the target population include Project PATHE, Project STATUS, and the School Transitional Environmental Program (Gottfredson, 2001; Reyes andJason, 1991). Furthermore, successful interventions for at-risk, adolescents that utilize at least one group component have been identified by McCord and Widom (2001) as well as the U.S. Department of Education (2001).

In summary, the experimental literature yields a mixed picture. The most successful intervention programs for chronically violent and delinquent youth (indicated or tertiary programs) have intentionally excluded the grouping of peers. Still, some very successful programs for at-risk adolescents–but not involved in seriously violent delinquency (selected or secondary programs)–have included grouping strategies. This suggests that involvement in therapeutic groups appears to or can induce a different and therapeutic impact than do

naturally occurring group affiliation processes. Whether such programs suppress the negative effects of naturally occurring deviant peer associations has not been experimentally tested.

Summary and Conclusions

Cross-sectional studies have consistently revealed significant and unique associations between adolescent delinquent peer friendships and group affiliations and delinquency and/or violence perpetration. The analyses of longitudinal data present a more complicated picture, suggesting that impact of deviant peer associations are substantially mediated and moderated by individual, family, and neighborhood influences. Finally, the experimental data suggest that associations between chronically delinquent and violent adolescents may result in increased or at least sustained levels of violence (though direct evidence for this assertion is weak). Several programs that include group components have been shown to be effective for adolescents with one or more risk factors who are not engaged in serious delinquent or violent behavior. Whether "deviancy training" operates within intentionally created therapeutic group-based interventions has not yet been examined (Poulin et al., 2001); however, at least one study suggests that the dynamics and impact of naturally occurring deviant peer groupings differs from intentionally created therapeutic groupings (Sussman et al., 2004). It is also theoretically possible that a group-based intervention can be designed to rally "negative leaders" to positively influence their peers (Miller-Johnson and Costanzo, in press). Certainly, a positive youth development approach that focuses on strengths, provides opportunities to improve their lives, and encourages youth to collaborate in designing such programs would dictate that this is possible (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Greene, 1996). This is particularly important when focusing on school-based interventions, which are organized to promote group and classroom based efforts.

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Biography

Michael Greene has held senior policy, research, and programmatic positions in the area of youth violence during his 30-year professional career. He was the founding Executive Director of the Violence Institute of New Jersey, served as New York City's Juvenile Justice Administrator, is a member of the American Psychological Association's Cadre of Experts in Youth Violence, and presently serves as the Director of the YCS Center for the Prevention of Violence Prevention. Dr. Greene has lectured extensively on the topic youth and school violence and has written book chapters and peer refereed articles on violence-related topics. He has also served as Principal Investigator for federal, state, and foundation funded projects, including an initiative to provide services for young children exposed to violence, two evidenced-based dispositional alternative programs, a data collection and technical assistance program for school districts, and a mentoring children of prisoners program.