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The Impact of an Alternative to Detention Program on Developmental Assets for Adolescents Involved in the Juvenile Justice or Legal System

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Positive youth development (PYD) models can play a critical role in programming for at-risk youth involved with the Juvenile Justice System (JJS) or legal system. This article reports on the outcomes of a study that examined the impact of the Reinvesting in Youth (RIY) program on increasing developmental assets for youth who are at-risk for detention or higher level of care placements. RIY is a three to six month preventive and ATD program within a large non-profit behavioral healthcare organization that provides case management, community asset navigation, and academic support through an asset-building framework. Fifty-nine youth discharged from RIY were included in the study. The impact of the program was measured using the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP). Using a dependent samples t-test, results indicate that the RIY program has a significant and positive impact on increasing assets from admission to discharge on total asset scores, internal and external assets, and seven of the eight asset categories.

INTRODUCTION

Positive youth development (PYD) models can play a critical role in programming for at-risk youth involved with the Juvenile Justice System (JJS) or legal system. Developmental assets are essential building blocks in positive youth development and research has shown that the more assets one has, the more likely they are to display prosocial behaviors and avoid high-risk behaviors (Mannes, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005; Scales, 2000; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma, & van Dulmen, 2006; Search Institute, 2017). Tools like the Developmental Asset Profile (DAP) can be beneficial in assessing assets and building treatment plans to decrease areas of vulnerability and bolster areas of strength (Search Institute, 2017). Although research on PYD models for youth with JJS involvement is growing, few systematic evaluation or research efforts have been undertaken to examine the

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impact of such models in preventive and alternative to detention (ATD) programs on increasing assets (Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention [OJJDP], *Positive Youth Development*, 2014). This pilot study examined the effectiveness of a preventive ATD program on increasing developmental assets for at-risk youth with JJS or legal system involvement.

BACKGROUND

Alternatives to Detention

There are a variety of programs and approaches that can be used to prevent youth from being placed in confinement or secure detentions. Some of these approaches include community-based options such as alternatives to detention (OJJDP, *Alternatives to Detention and Confinement*, 2014). Detention and other highly restrictive placements can have detrimental effects on youth development and can sever crucial connections to community, family, and other supports that can serve as assets and protective factors. A report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011), *No Place for Kids*, indicates juvenile incarceration as dangerous, ineffective, unnecessary, obsolete, wasteful, and inadequate. From mental health to academic performance, detention can have harmful effects, diminish well-being, and interfere with healthy development. For example, research indicates that youth who are confined in detention have an increased risk for depression and suicidal and self-harming behaviors (OJJDP, *Alternatives to Detention and Confinement*, 2014).

Community-based ATD programs can keep youth in their communities of origin, schools, and families to ensure opportunities for continued growth, development, and learning (OJJDP, *Alternatives to Detention and Confinement*, 2014). Moreover, youth who participate in ATD programs are less likely to recidivate compared to counterparts who were detained (OJJDP, *Alternatives to Detention and Confinement*, 2014). Though limited research is available on effective community-based interventions, a large meta-analysis of delinquency interventions found that programs with a therapeutic orientation or philosophy (e.g. restorative, skill building, counseling, coordinated services) were more effective in reducing recidivism when compared to programs that focused on discipline, control, fear-based deterrence, and surveillance (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). There is limited research or program evaluation that supports methods such as community supervision and custodial care as they are typically used for controlling behavior rather than as a restorative practice (Lipsey et al., 2010).

Characteristics of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

Youth involved with the JJS or legal system often have significant histories of trauma and have high rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). It is estimated that 75 to 90% of youth in the JJS have been exposed to trauma and victimization (Abram et al., 2004; Dierkhising et al., 2013). More than 50% of youth in detention have experienced six or more traumatic incidents prior to arrest (Abram et al., 2004). Research has shown that there is a direct link between the development of persistent juvenile delinquency and associated behaviors and the experience of trauma and victimization (Ford, Chapman, Mack, & Pearson, 2006). In addition, the higher the ACE score, the higher the recidivism rates and the less time between offense and re-arrest or recidivism (Wolff, Baglivio, & Piquero, 2015).

Trauma can have a remarkable impact on physical, mental, and behavioral health and can increase a youth's likelihood to participate in high risk behaviors such as violence, substance use, suicidal behavior, and risky sexual behaviors that can lead to involvement in the JJS or legal system. Trauma and ACEs can negatively impact school and academic performance and can result in neurodevelopmental, social, emotional, and cognitive impairments as well (National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network, ND). Youth with trauma histories are at-risk for increased substance use problems, academic challenges, and child welfare involvement (Dierkhising et al., 2013).

In addition to trauma, youth in the JJS have high rates of mental health disorders. Researchers estimate that 70% of youth in the JJS meet criteria for a mental health disorder (Dierkhising et al., 2013). Because youth in the JJS or legal system have significant histories of trauma coupled with mental and behavioral health needs, it is critically important to build programming based on PYD models to mitigate the impact of ACEs and lessen risk. Assets and protective factors can buffer the impact of trauma and promote positive youth development despite high-risk environments (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development models and asset frameworks can play a critical role in programming for at-risk youth involved with the JJS or legal system. Research has shown that youth can thrive in high-risk environments if they have high levels of protective factors and assets (OJJDP, *Positive Youth Development*, 2014). Juvenile justice programming that successfully incorporates PYD concepts into practice can potentially prevent subsequent offending and recidivism rates (Barton & Butts, 2008). PYD models leverage youth and family strengths to build protective factors and assets (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], *Positive Youth Development*, 2014).

Although research supports PYD models for decreasing risk behaviors, traditional ATD and detention programs are built on a deficit-based model (OJJDP, *Positive Youth Development*, 2014). As opposed to viewing youth as “at-risk”, PYD models view them as “at-promise” and work to collaboratively develop competencies, assets, protective factors, connections, and support systems within the communities where youth and their families live (OJJDP, *Positive Youth Development*, 2014). PYD models place emphasis on building multiple areas of development including education, social competencies, employability, civic and life skills, which can “change the capacity of a youth from a liability to an asset” (OJJDP, *Positive Youth Development*, 2014).

Despite the importance of building assets, resiliency, and protective factors into programming to reduce risk, research and program evaluation testing the outcomes of ATD programming on increasing assets and reducing risk is limited (OJJDP, *Positive Youth Development*, 2014). In this article, we report the outcomes of a study that examined the impact of the RIY program on increasing developmental assets for youth who are at-risk for detention, higher level of care placements, and further involvement with the JJS.

METHODS

Intervention/Program Description

Hillside Family of Agencies (HFA) is a large non-profit behavioral healthcare organization that provides individualized health, education, and human services to youth and families through an integrated system of care from prevention to residential programs. Hillside is dedicated to using standardized assessment tools coupled with evidence-based practices to inform decision making and drive treatment planning to create positive outcomes, long-term sustainability, and social impact.

Reinvesting in Youth (RIY) is a three to six month preventive and ATD program within HFA. RIY provides services to youth across a continuum with varying needs, risks, and levels of involvement with JJS. For youth who are at-risk for involvement with JJS or the legal system, RIY serves more as a preventive program to deter further involvement. For youth who are pre-adjudicated, RIY serves more as an ATD program. RIY serves youth during both pre- and post-adjudication phases. Though youth can be referred from a variety of sources for differing reasons, the majority of youth served has some JJS or legal system involvement, either past or present.

Specialized staff provide case management, community asset navigation, and academic support. Hillside provides the case management services that include care coordination, goal setting and skill-building centered on family communication. RIY works with youth and families on sparks identification through the use of the Igniting Sparks Guide (Search Institute, 2018). Case managers also administer standardized assessment tools including the DAP. The community asset navigation is subcontracted through anchor sites embedded in community and neighborhood settlement houses. The Community Asset Navigator (CAN) meets with the youth and or family with the goal of connecting them to services to meet basic living needs. The CANs also focus on engaging youth and families in prosocial activities and provide skill-building supports based on the Casey Life Skills Assessment (Casey Family Programs, 2017). Moreover, they provide afterschool programs such as Girls Group, Face Forward 3, Teen EPI, Chess Club, Writing Group, and Shakespeare from the Streets. Lastly, each youth is assigned an Academic Liaison who serves as the formal link between RIY staff, the school district, and the family. The liaison understands the strengths of the youth and advocates for their needs within the academic setting. This includes helping families navigate through academic and other educational challenges.

Essential to the RIY model is anchoring services and supports within the family's immediate living area to maintain connections and rebuild fractured family, school, and community relationships. RIY is designed to create a web of immediately available resources by connecting youth and families with community organizations. These resources provide emergency resource stabilization and sustainable services to prevent placement, detention, gang involvement, violence, risky and delinquent behavior, and further involvement with the JJS or legal system.

RIY uses a strengths-based, positive youth development approach to building skills and developing assets by incorporating tools such as the DAP and Igniting Sparks Guide (Search

Institute, 2017). The DAP is used to build individual service plans, goals, and objectives, and to test the impact of the program on youth and family outcomes. Igniting Sparks is a guide that can be used to help youth “discover and explore their sparks- their unique interests and talents- which in turn leads to great personal and academic success” (Search Institute, 2018). Through the identification of sparks, youth develop positive visions of who they want to be in the future and then develop goals to accomplish those visions (Search Institute, 2018).

Within the first month of service, staff, youth, and families collaboratively develop family-driven, youth-guided service plans that are based on the DAP and Casey Life Skills Assessment data. In addition, collaboration begins with school, staff, and families. During months two through four, the primary focus of the program is on building skills and identifying sparks, providing wraparound supports, and leveraging community resources to gradually transfer support to the community- and family-based systems. During the last two months of programming, the discharge plan is evaluated and natural supports are solidified. In addition, post-assessments are administered to determine growth around outcomes and goal achievement.

Sample

Fifty-nine youth were discharged from RIY over 1.5 years; 55 youth completed an admission and discharge DAP assessment. Youth were between the ages of 11 and 17 and displayed PINs behaviors (persons in need of supervision) and or JD behaviors (juvenile delinquent). Youth were referred through Probation, Family Access and Connections Team (FACT), the County Department of Health and Human Services (DHS), and the city school district. Table 1 shows the RIY continuum of care and the applicable interventions based on the level of risk and need of the youth and family.

Measure and Data Collection

The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) is a tool based on PYD and the 40 Developmental Assets Framework. The tool contains 58 Likert scale items that measure internal and external assets linked to positive outcomes, social-emotional wellbeing, and success for youth into adulthood (Search Institute, 2017). External asset categories include: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time. Internal asset categories include: Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity. Asset categories are scored from zero to 30 (0-14 challenged, 15-20 vulnerable, 21-25 adequate, 26-30 thriving), whereas the total asset score ranges from zero to 60 (0-29 challenged, 30-41 vulnerable, 42-51 adequate, 52-60 thriving). The DAP was completed by the youth within 30 days of admission and discharge from the program. Data were entered into the Search Institute Platform and Hillside’s electronic medical record (EMR).

Design

The pilot study was a pre-experimental single group, pre-post test design using secondary data extracted from the Electronic Medical Record (EMR). The primary research question was: Does the RIY program significantly increase the total number of developmental assets from admission to discharge as measured by the DAP? This research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board as exempt.

Table 1*RIY Continuum of Care*

| | At-Risk Due to Chronic Absences and/or PINS Behaviors | Absences and PINS | Adjudicated PINs, Juvenile Delinquents, & Community-Eligible Juvenile Offenders | Adolescent Offenders | Youth Returning From Placement |
|---------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| Ages | 11-12 | 12-17 | 13-17 | 16-17 | Up to 17 |
| Intervention | Supports intervention plans, connects parents to schools, offers pro-social & asset development for entire family | Supports youth with absence issues and mental health needs, behavioral challenges, gang connections or lower-level charges | Regular interventions and support for diversion youth as well as collaboration around any probation & court requirements | Supports for youth who can now be charged as juvenile delinquents and community-eligible (current) Youthful Offenders and Adolescent Offenders | Reconnections with school and establishing pro-social connections |
| Goal | Avoid entry into juvenile justice system | Triage needs in home, school and community to avoid deeper involvement with juvenile justice system | Move off probation with no further juvenile justice involvement and increase developmental assets and pro-social connections to the community | Move off probation with no further juvenile justice involvement and increase developmental assets and pro-social connections to the community | Positive reentry to home, school and community |

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze sample characteristics. Fifty-two percent of the youth was female and 48% male. The mean age was 14.6 years old (SD = 1.2) and the mean length of service was approximately 177 days (SD = 46.1). The majority of the youth identified as Black or African American (66%) while the remaining identified as Multi-Racial (15%), White (7%), or Unknown/Other (12%). Twenty-two percent of the youth reported being Hispanic or Latino. The majority of the sample was involved in the JJS or legal system (71%) and was either pre- or post-adjudicated. Youth who were at-risk for JJS involvement represented 29% of the sample, though many of those youth had past JJS involvement (Table 2).

Table 2*Number of Youth in Sample on the RIY Continuum of Care*

| | At-Risk Due to Chronic Absences and/or PINS Behaviors | Absences and PINS | Adjudicated PINs, Juvenile Delinquents, & Community-Eligible Juvenile Offenders | Adolescent Offenders | Youth Returning From Placement |
|----------------------------------|---|-------------------|---|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Number of Youth in Sample | 17 (29%) | 25(42%) | 17 (29%) | 0 | 0 |

To evaluate whether the intake and discharge asset scores were equal, a primary dependent samples t-test was performed, along with multiple secondary dependent samples t-tests. Prior to conducting the analyses, the assumption of normally distributed scores was examined. According to Posten (1984), the dependent samples t-test is robust with respect to departures from normality and departures from homogeneity of variance when sample sizes are equal. It should also be noted that the correlation between the intake and discharge conditions were estimated and ranged from .313 to .542, suggesting that the dependent samples t-test is appropriate.

RESULTS

From admission to discharge, 73% of youth in the sample increased their total asset score and the average of total asset score increased from 36.7 to 41.3. Likewise, the average number of external assets and the average number of internal assets increase from 18.4 to 20.6 and 18.3 to 20.7 respectively. The increase in the average number of external and internal assets represents an improvement in the asset category from vulnerable to adequate.

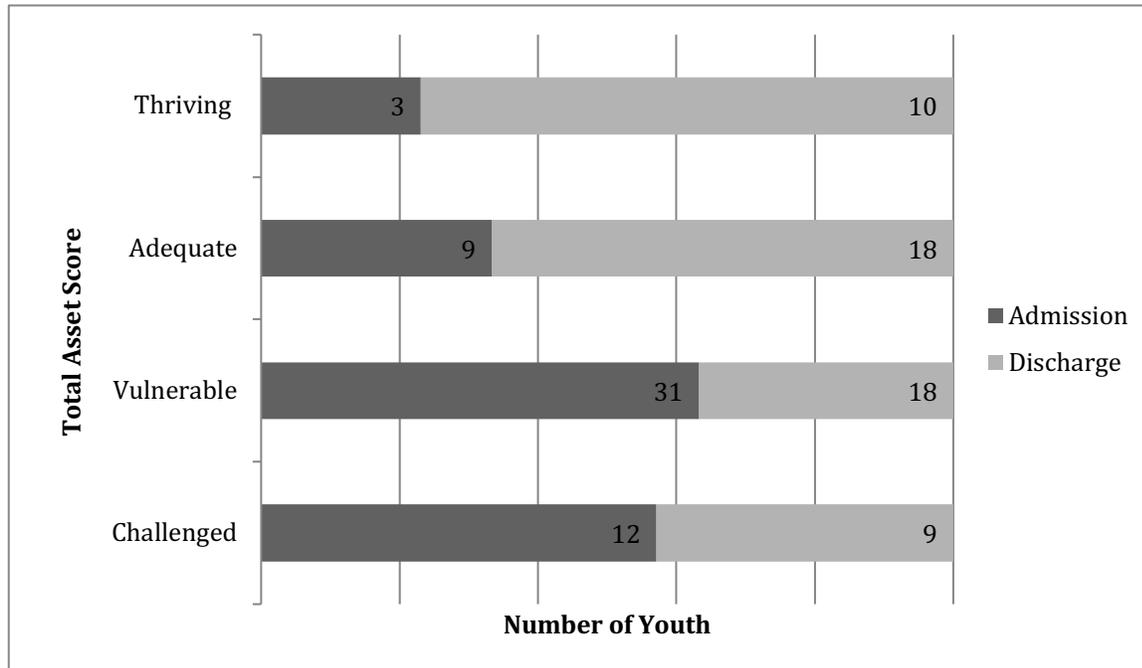
Results from a dependent samples t-test shown in Table 3 indicated that the assumption of equal pre- and post-scores was rejected for the total asset score addressing the primary research question. In addition, the assumption of equal pre- and post-test scores was rejected the external and internal asset scores, and for seven of the eight asset categories. These results show a significant difference between admission and discharge DAP scores in the direction of asset improvement. The discharge asset score mean was significantly higher than the admission asset score for all but the *Support Asset* category which was just slightly above a p value of .05 ($p = .052$ for *Support*). Cohen's d was used to estimate effect size and ranged from .29 to .53, indicating small or medium effects (Cohen, 1992).

Table 3*Results from the Dependent Samples T-Test (Total Asset Score)*

| Asset Category | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Paired Sample Correlations | t(58) | p | Cohen's d |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | | |
| Support | 19.6 | 6.994 | 21.5 | 7.573 | 0.537 | -1.982 | 0.052 | |
| Empowerment | 20.4 | 6.261 | 22.4 | 6.737 | 0.366 | -2.168 | 0.034* | 0.32 |
| Boundaries and Expectations | 19.4 | 5.778 | 21.7 | 6.646 | 0.494 | -2.792 | 0.007* | 0.37 |
| Constructive Use of Time | 13.4 | 6.904 | 16.1 | 8.552 | 0.455 | -2.527 | 0.014* | 0.35 |
| Commitment to Learning | 16.7 | 6.402 | 20.1 | 6.595 | 0.313 | -3.453 | 0.001* | 0.53 |
| Positive Values | 17.8 | 5.489 | 20.5 | 6.067 | 0.446 | -3.413 | 0.001* | 0.47 |
| Social Competencies | 18.4 | 5.496 | 20.1 | 6.227 | 0.501 | -2.255 | 0.028* | 0.29 |
| Positive Identity | 19.6 | 6.403 | 21.8 | 6.42 | 0.465 | -2.474 | 0.016* | 0.33 |
| External Assets | 18.4 | 5.465 | 20.6 | 6.516 | 0.542 | -2.869 | 0.006* | 0.36 |
| Internal Assets | 18.3 | 5.091 | 20.7 | 5.748 | 0.483 | -3.384 | 0.001* | 0.45 |
| Total Asset Score | 36.7 | 9.725 | 41.3 | 11.782 | 0.531 | -3.35 | 0.001* | 0.43 |

* $p < .05$. Note. Asset categories are scored from zero to 30 (0-14 challenged, 15-20 vulnerable, 21-25 adequate, 26-30 thriving) whereas the total asset score ranges from zero to 60 (0-29 challenged, 30-41 vulnerable, 42-51 adequate, 52-60 thriving)

Shown in Figure 1, the number of youth with a total asset score in the challenged and vulnerable categories decreased from admission to discharge while the number of youth in the adequate and thriving categories increased.

Figure 1*Change in Number of Youth in Asset Category from Admission to Discharge*

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Results from this study support the use of the PYD model to build assets in preventive and ATD programming with youth who are at-risk for or involved with the JJS or legal system. Using the DAP and the Igniting Sparks Guide to build assets and skills, the RIY program was associated with significant changes from admission to discharge in the following asset areas: empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. These developmental assets are essential building blocks in youth development that can help reduce and mitigate risk. Research has shown that the more assets youth have, the more likely they are to resist danger, delay gratification, and exhibit impulse control (Scales, 2000). In collaboration with youth and families, the RIY program focused on increasing assets to help youth avoid high risk behaviors such as violence, suicide, substance and alcohol use that can lead to further JJS or legal system involvement.

This study has implications for policy, practice, and research. Policy should reflect the importance of using PYD models and building assets in programming for youth who have interfaced with the JJS or legal system. Such policy support could contribute to practices that sustain long-term gains and positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities. Juvenile confinement and imprisonment is incredibly expensive, both from a monetary and social perspective. It is estimated that the average youth prison costs approximately \$401 per day, on top of the lifelong negative consequences incurred from being incarcerated (McCarthy, Schiraldi, & Shark, 2016). Realigning fiscal resources to embrace community-based options such as

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alternatives to detention have the potential of to reduce recidivism, decrease costs, and increase positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities.

As this was a pre-experimental pilot study with no control or comparison group and a small sample size, there are threats to internal validity. Despite these limitations, this study shows promising results for a preventive and ATD program on increasing assets that are critically important to positive youth development and reducing risk for youth involved in the JJS. These findings warrant future research that tests the effectiveness of preventive and ATD programs at increasing assets with more rigorous research designs and larger sample sizes. With larger sample sizes, future research will examine differences in subgroups (e.g., gender, age, level of risk at admission) served by RIY and if these differences have impact on asset scores and the change in these scores over time.

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