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Youth Offending in Denver: The Increasing Trend and Essential Elements to Successful Intervention

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Youth Offending in Denver: The Increasing Trend and Essential Elements to Successful Intervention

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed an alarming increase in youth offending across Denver, necessitating a thorough analysis of factors influencing the surge, as well as areas of improvement for current intervention methods. Juvenile delinquency is largely affected by complications associated with the transition to adulthood, such as the development of personal identity or a decrease in parental supervision. A full understanding of at-risk individuals must consider risk, promotive and protective factors, as well as the interaction between these three components. Past successful prevention and intervention methods have included relationship-building implementation, therapeutic strategies, and consistent measures of quality and accountability. Despite many Denver programs utilizing these essential elements, youth offending continues to rise. To combat this trend and strengthen existing organizations, Denver must concentrate resources to neighborhoods most in-need, reevaluate programs for areas of improvement and aid, and create an online system of data collaboration. Addressing the issue of youth offending in Denver will require a proactive, multidisciplinary approach. By implementing the recommended policies, the city and county can work towards creating a more promising environment for our youth, and a safer overall community.

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Youth Offending in Denver

The Increasing Trend and Essential Elements to Successful Intervention

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Youth Offending in Denver

The Increasing Trend and Essential Elements to Successful Interventions

Executive Summary

Recent years have witnessed an alarming increase in youth offending across Denver, necessitating a thorough analysis of factors influencing the surge, as well as areas of improvement for current intervention methods. Juvenile delinquency is largely affected by complications associated with the transition to adulthood, such as the development of personal identity or a decrease in parental supervision. A full understanding of at-risk individuals must consider risk, promotive and protective factors, as well as the interaction between these three components. Past successful prevention and intervention methods have included relationship-building implementation, therapeutic strategies, and consistent measures of quality and accountability. Despite many Denver programs utilizing these essential elements, youth offending continues to rise. To combat this trend and strengthen existing organizations, Denver must concentrate resources to neighborhoods most in-need, reevaluate programs for areas of improvement and aid, and create an online system of data collaboration. Addressing the issue of youth offending in Denver will require a proactive, multidisciplinary approach. By implementing the recommended policies, the city and county can work towards creating a more promising environment for our youth, and a safer overall community.

Problem Definition

The issue of youth offending in Denver poses a significant challenge to the criminal justice system as well as the larger community. An increasing trend in delinquent behavior, ranging from nonviolent to violent offenses, has been observed throughout the past two years. This change jeopardizes the safety of community members and raises questions on the effectiveness of current methods of intervention and prevention. To adequately address this problem, it is crucial to analyze the patterns and contributing factors associated with youth offending.

The Importance of Age

The prevailing understanding within the field of criminology is that young adults, specifically ages 18-24, are the population most at-risk to experience violent crime, both as victim and perpetrator (Kazemian, 2021; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2020; Perkins, 1997). This trend is partially explained by the large amount of biological, psychological, and social changes that occur during adolescence (Kazemian, 2021). One example is the development of personal values and identity, characteristic of the move towards independence from parents during this stage (Office of the Surgeon General (US) et al., 2001). Negotiating this separation, as well as increased interaction and influence from peer groups, can create stress within personal relationships. Without adequate support and resources to navigate these transitions, young adults may begin to exhibit offending behavior to assert independence, gain respect from peers, or as a response to restricted opportunities for growth (Office of the Surgeon General (US) et al., 2001). The challenges presented when entering adulthood are amplified among youth of marginalized groups who also face interplay between racial and criminal stigma, and who are overrepresented at all stages of the juvenile criminal justice system (Baglivio et al., 2014; Kazemian,

2021).

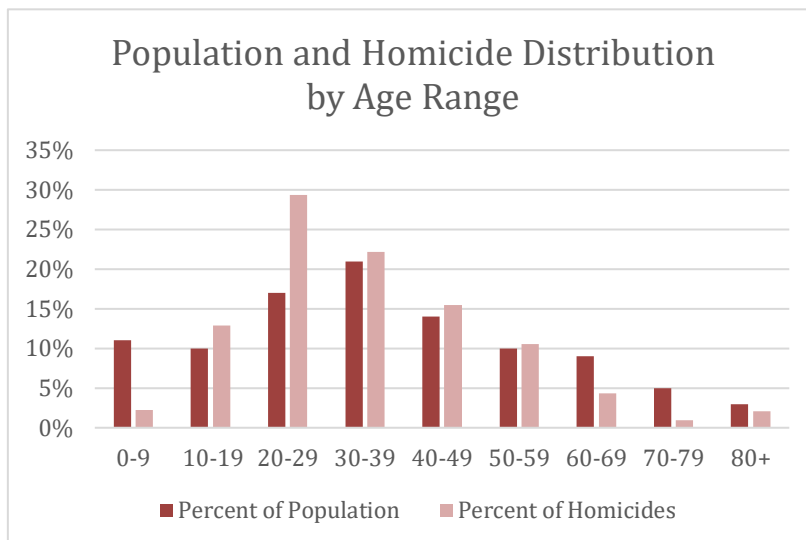


Figure #1: Population and Homicide Distribution by Age Range

This chart depicts the distribution of the 2021 Denver population and 2015-2023 Denver homicide offenders by age range (*Census Profile, 2021; Hamm, 2023*).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found young adults ages 18-24 more likely to be victims of serious violence compared to young adults 12-17 or 25 and over (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2020). Alongside victimization, young adults in this age group were also more at-risk

to commit violent crime. In Denver specifically, only 17% of the city's population is 20-29 years old, but this is the largest age group for homicide offenders (Hamm, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of criminal activity within this age group, researchers caution against severe punitive interventions targeting young adults. Although individuals are more susceptible to crime during late adolescence, the age-crime curve also represents a decrease in offending as one transitions into adulthood (Kazemian, 2021). Desistance, or the cognitive, social, and behavioral changes involved in the abandonment of criminal behavior, is seen as a normative process as individuals grow and mature (Kazemian, 2021). However, when exposed to controlling or coercive forms of intervention as juveniles, this process is disrupted and higher rates of recidivism are seen (Lipsey, 2009). It is important to consider the adolescent tendency to fall into and fall out of criminality and tailor policy to guide young adults to positive development during this period of transition.

Research Approach

Throughout the course of my undergraduate studies, as well as the discourse of the surrounding community of Denver, the issue of youth offending has emerged as an increasing problem. Since the last peak in 1997, Colorado has experienced a reliable decline in juvenile arrests. Between 2018 and 2021 specifically, juvenile arrests decreased 60% (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2023). However, after 2021 this trend shifted. In 2022 alone, the state has seen a 15.4% increase in juvenile filings, from 4,753 to 5,484 cases (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2023). The number of youths screened for detention has increased 13% within the same time frame. Youth violent crime has shown more stability, reflecting similar numbers in 2018 and 2021, but these rates remain 50% higher than the previous decade. My professors, as well as local leaders, have expressed concern for this trend and what it means for young people in the community. I sought to better understand the increase in offending and the solutions available.

These instances of youth crime, violent or nonviolent, are concentrated within the Front Range- Adams and Denver County specifically (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2023). This issue is fundamentally intertwined with the Denver community and cannot be fully investigated without input from local professionals who actively engage with these populations. I conduct a review of domestic and international literature, as well as Denver-specific policy reports, data and expert testimony to paint the clearest picture as to how to address this issue.

My purpose in highlighting the increasing trend in youth offending is not to sow fear or create a false caricature of inherently violent young people. This mistake has been made previously in the 1990s through the “superpredator” myth, a term coined by criminologists of the time to predict a surge of “remorseless” violent juvenile offenders. Using racially coded imagery and highly publicized heinous crimes, nearly every state was led to remove youth from juvenile courts and towards adult sentencing (Equal Justice Initiative, 2014). This narrative, later discredited among falling violent juvenile crime rates throughout the 1990s, was incredibly harmful to children exposed to excessive punishment during that time. My goal is to learn from the past, and instead point out the age demographic and its association with arrest rates for the purpose of addressing risk. The increase in youth offending post-pandemic indicates that current intervention strategies are no longer sufficient. By analyzing existing literature and incorporating input from experts who work within our community, I identify essential elements of successful interventions to inform future policy that will serve Denver’s unique needs.

Issue Analysis

Identifying Risk Factors

When studying crime, it is often difficult to pinpoint concrete causes as to why an individual exhibits delinquent behavior. Researchers have isolated variables that predict a high probability of juvenile offending, designating them as risk factors. By identifying and defining characteristics that have a

significant influence on delinquent behavior, policymakers may design and implement prevention methods to counteract certain risks (Farrington et al., 2016).

Multiple meta-analyses have revealed several important risk factors to the likelihood of youth offending. These may be organized into personal, relationship, and community domains to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the various influences that contribute to delinquent behavior among juveniles. The evaluation of personal risk factors acknowledges the importance of individual psychological and emotional development during the adolescent period. Young adults are given significantly more agency and less hands-on guidance, amplifying the need for individuals to have developed their own social and emotional skill set. Without the tools to motivate progress or regulate strong emotions, young adults may be more likely to exhibit delinquent behavior in response to the challenges of adolescence. These factors are often intrinsic and specific to personal circumstances and may be identified through individual interviews or assessments. Existing data upholds several personality characteristics as personal risk factors, such as poor impulse control, high troublesomeness, and high daring (Farrington et al., 2016; Pollard et al., 1999). Poor impulse control was often measured through various psychomotor evaluations such as the Porteus Maze or Spiral Maze, as planning ability and foresight have been associated with delinquency (Gibson, 1964). High troublesomeness was measured through peer and teacher evaluations of observed disobedience, such as frequency of breaking school rules. Parent and peer ratings of observed risky behavior in environments around traffic or while exploring were coded as high daring.

Several thought processes were also identified as risk factors, such as low self-aspirations and a positive attitude towards delinquency (Loeber et al., 2008). In this study, the aspiration measure was conducted through screening on goals and activities, asking participants to assess the importance of their goals and the likelihood they will meet their goals. Similar assessments were used to measure attitude towards delinquency, asking participants about the causes and consequences of delinquency, as well as their

personal experiences with interventions. Through the comparison of characteristics of adolescents who have been convicted or displayed delinquent behavior, researchers were able to highlight specific personality elements and thought processes that predict a likelihood of offending.

Aspects of a juvenile's relationship with others, specifically within family and peer groups, also play a significant role in adolescent life and behavior. Although this age group is marked by a growth of independence, young adults remain strongly influenced by pressures of significant figures. For example, prior research has revealed peers are more likely to influence adolescents through modeling of accepted behavior, whereas parents are more likely to establish expected norms (Biddle et al., 1980). Adolescents may respond to these pressures directly or internalize preferences for conduct. Relationship risk factors form when adolescents are exposed to delinquent behavior or antisocial norms that increase the likelihood of offending. These factors are influenced by social interactions and are typically measured through assessments of family dynamics or ratings of delinquency from family or peers.

Researchers identify family history of crime, such as a convicted parent, as a predictor of problem behavior from the juvenile within the home (Farrington et al., 2016; Lane, 2018; Pollard et al., 1999). Specific family characteristics have been found to be risk factors as well, such as large family size, poor family management, and high levels of family conflict (Loeber et al., 2008; Pollard et al., 1999). These findings highlight the negative effect of norms that validate delinquent behavior, as well as the importance of supportive family relationships. Peer behavior such as drug use and delinquency, as well as an increased number of delinquent friends, has also been found to increase likelihood of offending behavior (Lane, 2018; Laser et al., 2007; Loeber et al., 2008; Pollard et al., 1999). Adolescents, in an effort to fit in with established behavioral expectations, may begin to model the actions and beliefs of their peers. The social expectations set by family and peers pressure adolescents to adjust behavior to conform, sometimes resulting in the manifestation of delinquency.

Aspects of the external environment in which the juvenile lives, such as their neighborhood and community, also have a significant impact on the likelihood of delinquency. Community risk factors embody the physical, social, and economic aspects of an environment, identified through community assessments, crime statistics, and neighborhood social conditions. Much prior research identifies communities of concentrated disadvantage to demonstrate a high likelihood of low achievement in school and adolescent criminal involvement (Farrington et al., 2016; Lane, 2018; Laser et al., 2007). Here it is important to recognize the disproportionate representation of Black and Hispanic youth attending high-poverty schools, resulting in the increased impact of educational failure on that specific population (Lane, 2018; McFarland et al., 2017). Black youth were also found to be significantly overrepresented within serious, violent, and chronic (SVC) youth offenders, as severe youth were 101% more likely to be Black than White (Baglivio et al., 2014). However, despite this disproportionate representation of youth of color, much of the research supports that the age-crime curve and many other criminological trends are not affected by race. For example, within SVC analysis, it has been seen that individuals who begin offending earlier are more likely to have a serious, violent, and chronic career, regardless of race and gender differences (Baglivio et al., 2014).

The number of risk factors present is also important, as likelihood of delinquency and decreased developmental competence has been found to be associated with multiple risk factors (Assink et al., 2015; Pollard et al., 1999; Sameroff et al., 2003). This may be seen when comparing life-course persistent offenders with individuals whose delinquent behavior was confined to their adolescence. Those who continued to offend into adulthood demonstrated higher level risk factors across multiple different domains compared to purely adolescent offenders (Assink et al., 2015). This finding also suggested that multiple areas of life are involved and influential on the manifestation of delinquent behavior.

Refocusing on Promotive and Protective Factors

Despite success in identifying certain factors that influence the risk of youth offending, this focus created a deficit-based, stigmatizing approach to intervention. More recent literature suggests a new perspective, including the investigation into protective and promotive factors as well as risk factors (Butts et al., 2018; Denver Office of Children's Affairs, 2023; Farrington et al., 2016; Pollard et al., 1999). While risk factors are essential to understanding the potential challenges and vulnerabilities youth may face, considering protective and promotive factors empowers youth in their positive development and resilience.

Promotive factors are defined as variables that predict a low probability of offending (Farrington et al., 2016; Loeber et al., 2008). It may seem intuitive to equate this to the antithesis of a risk factor, meaning low levels of a known risk factor would result in a promotive effect. However, not all variables are linearly related to offending. One study evaluating early adolescent males in Pittsburg, PA trichotomized their variables, measuring each at high, medium, and low levels to determine those that were exclusively risk or promotive (Loeber et al., 2008). If one level of a variable was related to increased offending but showed no change in the other two levels, the variable was designated as a risk factor. If one level of a variable was related to decreased offending, but no significance in other levels, it was a promotive factor. If a variable showed increased offending at one level and decreased offending at another, it was linearly related to youth delinquency.

This difference is observed within several examples from the Loeber et al. study. Students in the highest category of school achievement were found to have reduced levels of violence, but students in the middle and lowest categories of school achievement displayed similar levels of violence (Loeber et al., 2008).

This designates high school achievement as solely a promotive factor, as it predicts a low probability of violence when present but does not predict a high probability of violence when absent. Another nonlinear relationship is seen within peer delinquency. Nine percent of male adolescents with low levels of delinquent peers displayed violence, compared to 11% of adolescents with medium levels of delinquent

peers and 40% of adolescents with high levels of delinquent peers (Loeber et al., 2008). The significant effect is only seen when peer delinquency increases from medium to high levels, designating this variable as a risk factor and not a promotive factor.

Similar to risk factors, promotive factors are also often categorized into personal, relationship, and community characteristics. Low levels of neuroticism and high levels of moral development are examples of personal promotive factors (Farrington et al., 2016; Laser et al., 2007). Neuroticism, often defined as quick negative emotional arousal or emotional instability, was measured through the New Junior Maudsley Inventory. Moral development was coded through questions on moral feeling, such as if a participant felt shame when they did something wrong. Both of these factors indicate increased emotional regulation, which may aid adolescents in managing difficult situations that present risks. Research that differentiates between the concepts of risk and promotive factors also loosely investigates why certain factors cause certain effects. For example, the Pittsburg study found many childrearing variables to be promotive factors, hypothesizing that general positive engagement with the family predicted low probability of offending (Loeber et al., 2008). Recognizing the importance of support during adolescence, this may be expanded to view familial support as an important promotive element. The trichotomization of variables allows for a more nuanced categorization of the risk of individuals, and therefore a more tailored intervention approach.

Some promotive factors not only predict a low probability of offending, but also significantly reduce or nullify the impact of present risk factors (Farrington et al., 2016; Loeber et al., 2008; Pollard et al., 1999). These factors, termed protective factors, play a crucial role in identifying effective elements towards at-risk situations. Farrington et al. explains it well; “When the protective factor is present, the probability of offending does not increase in the presence of the risk factor; when the protective factor is absent, the probability of offending does increase in the presence of the risk factor” (Farrington et al., 2016). These

protective factors are then further divided into interactive protective factors and risk-based protective factors (Farrington et al., 2016).

Interactive protective factors are variables that interact with specific risk factors to suppress their effects. In the Farrington study, troublesomeness was the strongest predictor of youth offending, so variables were tested to evaluate reduced convictions within this subgroup. Seven variables were found to decrease the amount of troublesome boys convicted by at least 10%, with the most successful interactive protective factor being a mother with a full-time job (Farrington et al., 2016). The job of the mother was also found to be a promotive factor, meaning this variable both predicted low probability of offending and was significant in buffering the risk factor of troublesomeness. Researchers speculated that full-time working mothers predicted lower rates of delinquency because they were more likely within the sample to be intelligent, competent, and have fewer children (Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). However, this finding conflicts with the larger literature supporting increased parental supervision as a promotive factor against youth violence, and thus deserves more research to determine how employment level of the parent impacts juvenile offending.

Alternatively, risk-based protective factors are variables that predict a low probability of offending among a group that has already been categorized as high-risk based on present risk factors. One example is high nonverbal and verbal intelligence and high school attainment, which were both found to significantly decrease the likelihood of conviction among boys who had experienced relatively poor child rearing (Farrington et al., 2016). Aspects of positive influential relationships within an adolescent's life may also function as important protective measures. The Farrington study found high parental supervision to protect against the risk factor of high dishonesty within the juvenile (Farrington et al., 2016). Similar work has highlighted the importance of social bonding and strong positive relationships during the adolescent period (Farrington et al., 2016; Pollard et al., 1999). Farrington researchers only go so far as to speculate the importance of parental socialization early on, but do not draw conclusions as to why these

variables function as interactive protective factors. Pollard et al. pushes a bit further, highlighting research that theorizes positive community, family, and peer relationships result from increased opportunity for involvement (Pollard et al., 1999).

The risk-promotive-protective paradigm allows researchers to identify factors that principally operate as risk or promotive, as well as investigate the interaction between risk and protection. Through the identification of promotive factors of positive youth behavior and interactive protective factors, adolescent-targeted interventions may be reframed to cultivate necessary skills and resources. This positive approach is also more attractive to communities who wish to focus on the opportunity to grow, instead of the deficits of the neighborhood (Farrington et al., 2016).

Essential Elements of Successful Solutions

After analyzing the risk factors influencing youth offending and the importance of promotive and protective factors, potential policy may be raised and evaluated. Through the examination of literature on existing programs, essential elements of successful programs may be extracted and included in future legislation.

Considering the Context

Juvenile offending has been approached in many different ways, making it difficult to compare and identify successful programs. Recent literature has pointed out the flaws of previous methods of measuring effectiveness, stating that evaluations have been measured against a limiting risk-based understanding of youth offending. Instead, some researchers propose intervention effectiveness be measured by outcome as well as differences in implementation (context) and mechanisms of change used (Case et al., 2022). This is similar to the sentiment expressed by those pushing for a new focus on promotive factors within criminal justice policy: studying risk factors alone ignores important surrounding influences.

In what has been defined as a “realist” approach, context is expanded to include relational and dynamic features that shape the mechanisms at work (Greenhalgh & Manzano, 2022). For example, if an intervention is successful in one school, but not another, a realist will investigate what individuals, methods of implementation, or other situational factors within the setting changes the effectiveness of the program. This is seen in the evaluation of an antiretroviral therapy club in South Africa, where participants were more likely to remain in treatment when they established trust and a sense of social support from their facilitator (Greenhalgh & Manzano, 2022). To this end, context is intrinsically involved in the success of an intervention, as thus deserves ample consideration when implementing a program.

This approach supports a more relationship-based framework when crafting interventions, as the people and methods of implementation have significant influence over outcome. Redefining programming success to rely on strength of relationship between facilitator and participant is yet another example of the shift in literature to include promotive factors in addition to mitigating risk. The relationships built through the implementation of a program promote the development of agency and prosocial behavior. This may be observed in an evaluation of care for juveniles with life limiting conditions, where young adults were seen to develop a sense of ownership towards their care when service providers dedicated ample time to make the adolescent feel valued and prioritized (Greenhalgh & Manzano, 2022). Tracy Durant, sociology and criminology professor at the University of Denver and Executive Director of Step by Step Youth and Step Up Foundation, echoed a similar sentiment when asked about successful interventions in Denver. She recounted that even the toughest clients tend to respond well to positive mentors who will aid them in reaching their goals (T. Durant, personal communication, September 21, 2023). The more a relationship between caregiver and participant is nurtured, whether through trust or time, the more active a role the participant will play in their own skill development and recovery. This effect is enhanced when implemented by a “credible messenger”, or someone with lived experience. As

explained by Elie Zwiebel, Executive Director of the Colorado Juvenile Defender Center, folks who can relate to youth on a personal level, rather than a theoretical one, aid in reducing the harm that may be caused in the process of intervention (E. Zwiebel, personal communication, September 25, 2023).

Much of the recent literature evaluating strategies has also emphasized the importance of treatment that is tailored to certain individual characteristics. One variable found to be relevant in success of intervention was risk. Several meta-analyses found larger recidivism effects when working with juveniles with higher delinquency risk, mostly measured by number of prior offenses (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 2009). Some research deems this finding the “risk principle,” meaning higher levels of service should be reserved for higher risk cases (Andrews et al., 1990). This effect was offset somewhat in research where individuals with multiple prior offenses, as well as aggressive or violent histories, demonstrated smaller recidivism effects, suggesting that aggression may be another variable used to differentiate juveniles and specify treatment (Baglivio et al., 2014; Lipsey, 2009).

Alongside delinquency risk, much of the literature has pointed to the importance of criminogenic needs, or dynamic risk factors that are associated with a change in likelihood of criminal conduct. These may include modifying antisocial attitudes, peer associations, or levels of familial involvement (Andrews et al., 1990). For example, the promotion of familial affection and parental supervision introduces additional positive influences, as well as the possibility of consequences for delinquent behavior. The modification of risk factors into protective skills may be used to increase contingencies within multiple aspects of a juvenile’s life. One meta-analysis found that behavioral interventions that also considered individual criminogenic needs produced larger positive effects of recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990). By tailoring intervention to individual risk level and individual criminogenic need, juvenile offenders may be more effectively addressed.

Type and Quality of Intervention

Different strategies and frameworks of intervention have also been found to produce varying levels of recidivism. Much of the literature supports a “therapeutic” intervention philosophy over a coercive or discipline-heavy approach (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 2009). Therapeutic programs attempt to engage adolescents in supportive and constructive processes of change, as opposed to a controlling method of discipline or surveillance (Lipsey, 2009). Fear of official punishment has not been found to have a significant effect on delinquency, and coercive methods work against the relationship-based approach needed to reframe juvenile offending. Instead, therapeutic methods such as counseling or skill building demonstrated larger effects on recidivism (Kimbrell et al., 2022; Lipsey, 2009). Additionally, one meta-analysis found differences in effectiveness between therapeutic approaches to be negligible, as every therapeutic method demonstrated significantly higher effects compared to nontherapeutic approaches like surveillance or discipline (Lipsey, 2009). This strategy supports the larger academic shift in intervention literature calling for the inclusion of positive development. By refocusing strategies to build up protective factors as well as mitigate risk factors, juveniles may face modern day criminogenic risks with a more comprehensive set of individual skills.

In addition to type of intervention, quality was also found to be a significant factor in the production of high impacts on recidivism. Difficult to operationalize, some studies have used the level of involvement of the researcher or indications of problems within the program (dropout rate, poorly trained personnel) as a proxy to quality of implementation. Background literature found quality to be strongly related to low levels of recidivism, as some less effective intervention types outperformed more effective strategies when implemented with a high level of quality (Lipsey, 2009). One meta-analysis comparing multiple different intervention types found quality to be the second largest consistent relationship with recidivism effects, behind level of delinquency risk (Lipsey, 2009). It is also important to note that well-implemented programs have been seen to work equally across gender, race, and ethnicity categories (Lane, 2018). When coded as involvement of the researcher, quality is produced through academic measures of

accountability. Although difficult to replicate in non-research settings, future interventions for juvenile offending must include checks to maintain accountability and quality within the program.

Case Study: Roca's High Risk Young Men Intervention Model

Many of these essential elements are modeled in Roca's High Risk Young Men's Program, an intervention strategy targeting young men affected by incarceration in the greater Boston area. The organization of Roca was founded in 1988 with the goal of transforming the lives of high-risk young people through data-driven evaluation and outreach (Baldwin & Ward, n.d.). The High Risk Young Men's Program is specifically geared towards the most disaffected of this population, working with men aged 17-24 who are not involved in work or school and perpetuating dangerous behaviors (Baldwin & Ward, n.d.). Each individual is paired with a Youth Worker, who forms a trusting positive relationship in which hard conversations about behavior and life choices may be fostered. The first two years of this program involve intensive training in life skills and work readiness, as well as transitional employment opportunities. Continued support is provided for the next two years, but in a much less hands-on approach.

In 2021, an independent study team evaluated Roca and the High Risk Young Men's Program. The report confirmed Roca's use and commitment to four essential tenets: 1) the creation of safety and stability through outreach and transformational relationships, 2) the education of life-skills through a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) curriculum, 3) the repetitive practice of skills through stage-based programming, and 4) the incorporation of engaged institutions (Abt Associates, 2021). Researchers found the relationships facilitated by Youth Workers to be associated with increased odds of obtaining unsubsidized employment, as secured by almost 40% of their participants (Abt Associates, 2021). Roca's transitional employment program was linked to lower likelihood of new conviction, reducing odds of violent recidivism for participants by 66% (Abt Associates, 2021). Finally, the coping skills taught through Roca's CBT curriculum were found to reduce engagement with risky behaviors and encourage

the manifestation of accomplishments, such as finding employment and additional positive role models (Abt Associates, 2021).

This report reinforces many of the essential elements outlined in the previous intervention research. Roca, through the establishment of trusting, positive peer relationships, lays the groundwork for the success of many other components of their model. Its therapeutic approach leverages promotive factors that may already be present and is supported as a more successful strategy compared to punitive measures.

Proposed Solutions

Youth offending prevention and intervention is not a novel concept in Denver. There are many organizations at the state and local level that have been working against juvenile crime for years, and several who practice similar strategies. Two major organizations within juvenile intervention in the area are the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS) and the Denver Youth Violence Prevention Action Table (YVPAT). The Colorado DYS, recently named Program of the Year by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, operates on the state's detention continuum to screen, supervise, and secure detention of juvenile offenders. While committed, youth receive a variety of residential treatment services, from education and vocational training to trauma-based CBT. Despite the recent increase in detention admissions, the DYS has reported a 20-point drop in one-year recidivism rates, from 41.1% in fiscal year 2017-2018 to 22.1% in 2019-2020 (Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2023). At the city level, the Denver Youth Violence Prevention Action Table (YVPAT) was convened to outline Denver's approach to this crisis. This team collaborates with local organizations and guides the city to address youth violence through annual prevention plans.

One common theme seen across groups is deterrence from traditional court processes. This approach stems from literature associating youth contact with the juvenile justice system and higher rates of recidivism, as well as increased prevalence of mental health disorders (Petitclerc et al., 2013; "Youth

Involved with,” n.d.). Deterrence is practiced by the City and County of Denver through the Voluntary Diversion Program and the Municipal Juvenile Diversion Program, as well as the Denver District Attorney’s Office’s Juvenile Diversion Program. These initiatives employ cognitive-behavioral programming, family intervention, and community-based restorative justice opportunities with the goal of reduced interaction with the criminal justice system. The Municipal Juvenile Diversion Program specifically has seen success, as participants demonstrated an 11% recidivism rate compared to 22% for those who did not complete diversion (“Public Safety Youth Programs,” n.d.).

Additional common strategies employed by Denver-based programs are mentorship and career-readiness training. As identified within the literature, positive personal and social skills gained through relationships and careers can act as protective factors against the probability of offending (Farrington et al., 2016; Pollard et al., 1999). Denver experts featured in a recent public discussion, *Kids in the Crossfire, A Town Hall: Exploring Solutions to Youth Violence in Denver*, supported similar claims. This discussion highlighted several important elements of future solutions, as well as aspects of contention as to how to approach youth offending. One component that was wholeheartedly agreed upon as a successful intervention strategy was the consistent presence of a caring, trusted adult in a young person’s life. Panelist Jonathan McMillan, Director of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Education, emphasized the importance of an adult to learn from, confide in, and grow through a traumatic experience alongside (McMillan, 2023). This support system not only aids a juvenile through conflict but helps them develop the emotional intelligence needed to handle future obstacles. Professor Tracy Durant expanded on this approach, adding that lack of supervision is one of the biggest risk factors to youth getting in trouble, and intervention models that provide mentors can aid in supplementing that gap (Durant, 2023). Local organizations such as From the Heart, Gang Rescue and Support Project, Fully Liberated Youth, and Denver Juvenile Services’ Helping Youth Pursue Excellence (HYPE) are a few examples of programs offering peer mentorship, career training, and employment opportunities to at-risk youth in the community.

Finally, many Denver organizations are dedicated to researching and spreading information about specific local issues. One example is Southwest Vida, a youth-run magazine dedicated to addressing the needs of their community through information and advocacy. Another is Steps to Success and Park Hill Strong, two community coalitions that identify local risk and protective factors and develop evidence-based intervention strategies in collaboration with the University of Colorado's Youth Violence Prevention Center.

Strategic Recommendations

When comparing essential elements for successful interventions and the work being done within current Denver organizations, it is difficult to see a disconnect. Many local programs utilize evidence-based strategies that have shown success in other domestic and international cities. Despite these efforts, youth offending continues to rise within the community. To combat this trend and strengthen the city's existing programs, Denver must implement the following policy changes:

1. Prioritization of high-risk neighborhoods

Research on successful solutions revealed the importance of tailoring intervention methods to individual characteristics, most notably through risk of delinquency (Andrews et al., 1990; Lipsey, 2009). The Denver Office of Children's Affairs 2023 report is a key resource in identifying these high-risk areas of the community. Through the consideration of 16 key social indicators related to health, education, community, economy, and environment, the YVPAT has created a Youth Violence Prevention Index to identify areas of concern and focus prevention efforts. The map identifies several neighborhoods as having increased challenges to youth, including Globeville, Elyria Swansea, Montbello, Villa Park, Sun Valley, and Westwood.

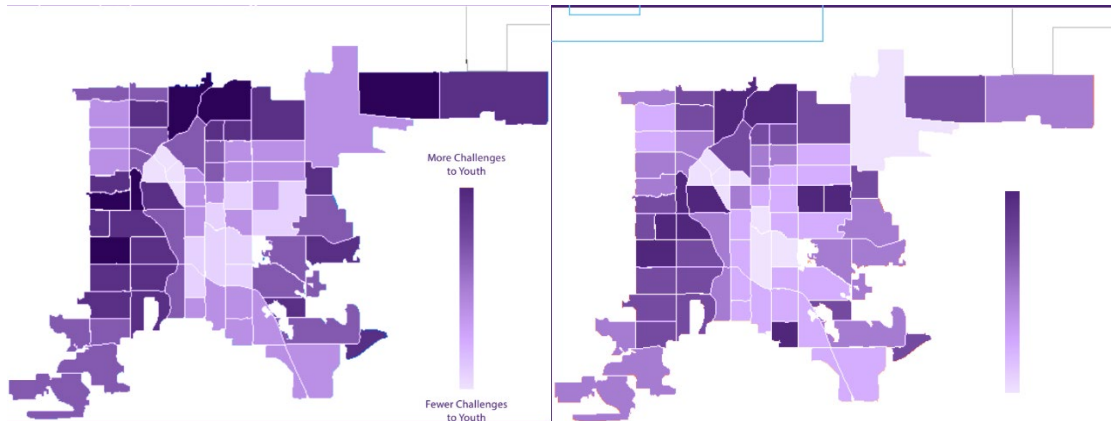


Figure #2: Distribution of Challenges to Youth in Denver Neighborhoods
 This figure compares the Denver YVPAT’s 2017-2021 Youth Violence Prevention Index and 2022 Child Well-Being Index. Neighborhoods in darker purple signify additional challenges presented to youth in that area (Denver Office of Children’s Affairs, 2023).

The Office of Children's Affairs also references the 2022 Child Well-Being Index, which measures several key indicators such as teen births, child poverty and adults without a high school diploma. This map highlights several of the same neighborhoods as the Violence Prevention Index, further supporting these communities as areas of concentrated risk. These resources may direct evidence-based methods towards Denver neighborhoods most in need of services, and therefore improve the safety of the overall community.

2. A comprehensive evaluation of Denver prevention and intervention programs

Measures of success within the field of juvenile intervention are difficult to quantify, and even more difficult to compare between organizations. Existing literature has highlighted the importance of quality implementation to the success of programs; however, Denver has no thorough and consistent evaluation method for their supported organizations. In the recent Town Hall, Aurora Councilwoman Angela Lawson expressed concern around city money being invested wisely, as organizations only provide quarterly reports and constituents complain about increasing juvenile arrest rates (Lawson, 2023). Jonathan McMillan, as well as others on the panel, pushed back on this point, saying organizations often do not have the staffing or resources

to collect the data demonstrating the impact of their work (McMillian, 2023). To supplement this lack of data and sufficiently support Denver's front-line organizations, the city must conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the programs it supports.

This program will consist of three phases: 1) preparation and data collection, 2) stakeholder engagement, and 3) analysis and recommendations for improvement. The Denver Office of Children's Affairs, in collaboration with the Youth Violence Prevention Action Table and other relevant parties, will form a multidisciplinary team of evaluators, including experts in juvenile justice and program assessment. A professional evaluation service will be provided to every government-funded juvenile justice prevention or intervention program, supplementing the limits of smaller organizations who do not have the bandwidth or resources to gather more thorough measures. Evaluation criteria will include recidivism rates and population served, as well as the more qualitative measure of relationships formed with facilitators and mentors. Program staff and participants will be involved through interviews and focus groups to gather insights on effectiveness and areas of needed support. The quantitative and qualitative data collected through this process will then be analyzed against the outlined evaluative criteria and summarized into areas of success and opportunities for improvement.

To achieve a comprehensive evaluation and aid as many programs as possible in their service to the community, organizations must be incentivized to engage. Participating programs will be recognized publicly, as well as awarded additional funding for dedicating time to the evaluation. Organizations will also have the opportunity to gain more resources through training in data collection and evaluation, giving stakeholders the skills and additional funding needed to continue consistent reporting in the future. A few experts on the recent Town Hall mentioned the harm in questioning front-line organizations and pushed back on policy forcing more thorough data collection. By providing this initial evaluation service, as well as programming to teach and

fund in-house data collection in the future, Denver would demonstrate its unwavering support for these organizations and their missions. This program will require significant time and resource allocation, but it is essential to the city's accountability, effectiveness, and efficient use of resources towards youth offending prevention and intervention.

3. Increased transparency between Denver neighborhoods and adjacent regions

Increasing collaboration between local programs is an essential step towards progress in juvenile intervention outcomes. As expressed in the Town Hall, there is not sufficient collaboration between Colorado cities on this issue. Aurora City Councilmember Angela Lawson spoke of a discontinued Aurora-Denver Compact, created in 2020 to share data and resources surrounding juvenile offending. She encouraged its revival, as well as its expansion into other regions, stating that youth violence “crosses borders” (Lawson, 2023). The Denver YVPAT outlines this very model, suggesting a regional compact between metro-area cities and counties with formal agreements to share data (Denver Office of Children's Affairs, 2023).

Denver can increase transparency between neighborhoods and organizations through a centralized database. After establishing a more thorough understanding of the challenges presented to the previous Aurora-Denver Compact, a new collaboration may be crafted that includes the counties, as well as the smaller organizations that exist within them. Barring confidential information, organizations would have the opportunity to share strategies, collaborate on initiatives, and provide aid to others in the area. The database would also function as a community resource, outlining the local programs and highlighting success stories. Youth violence is experienced by an entire community, yet current programs are siloed. Denver organizations, as well as those in neighboring areas, must share insights and unite community knowledge to fortify a response that supports local youth and contributes to the growing understanding of juvenile justice. Only through collective action and holistic approach can this issue be effectively addressed.

Weaknesses and Limitations

These policy actions, although recommended in my analysis, have limitations. A comprehensive evaluation will require incredible stakeholder involvement, with careful consideration of each organization's needs, concerns, and limitations. Reviving the previous Aurora-Denver Compact will also present challenges, as past obstacles must be overcome, and the scope expanded to include input from smaller organizations. Finally, all these initiatives will require additional buy-in, funding and resources.

There were also several limitations within my own analysis. Firstly, I was unable to pursue a more formal process of data collection. As crime data involving juveniles is withheld and protected as a vulnerable population, the inclusion of more specific data would require timely IRB considerations. Future analysis should consider Denver Police data on juvenile crime to thoroughly evaluate the neighborhoods most affected by youth offending and gain a more nuanced understanding of the contributing community factors. My analysis was also limited to a select few community experts who were available to provide input. Future analysis should include a larger range of local professionals to develop a more comprehensive idea of community opinion on juvenile offending and intervention. There remains the question of why youth offending is increasing in Denver, despite the city's extensive programming. Through continued research and dedicated community efforts, progress may be made towards understanding this pressing issue.

Conclusion

Implementing a holistic approach of prioritizing at-risk neighborhoods, evaluating, and strengthening current intervention programs, and increasing collaboration between local efforts is paramount to address the concerning rise in youth offending in Denver. By leveraging these strategies, the city will strengthen and support the organizations who actively engage with local youth and create the most change in our community.

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