Reading for Life: A Crime Prevention Program for Juvenile Offenders

Alesha Seroczynski, William Evans, Amy Jobst, Luke Horvath, and Giuliana Carozza, "Reading for Life and Adolescent Re-Arrest: Evaluating a Unique Juvenile Diversion Program," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, vol. 35, 2016, pp. 662-682.

Overview:

This is a promising, well-conducted randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the Reading for Life (RFL) diversion program, a mentoring and character-development program for first- or second-time juvenile offenders with nonviolent records that seeks to build virtuous character through the study of moral themes in literature. The study, which had a sample of 408 youth, found sizable effects on re-arrests during the study's follow-up period, which ranged from four to 46 months after random assignment depending on when youth enrolled in the study. Specifically, 30 percent of RFL youth were re-arrested during the follow-up period versus 38 percent of the control group youth, who were assigned to treatment-as-usual—that is, community service. For felony offenses, these figures were 15 percent versus 22 percent, respectively. (The effect on felony arrests was statistically significant at the 0.05 level, and the effect on total arrests was significant at the 0.07 level.)

The study's main limitation is that it was conducted in a single medium-sized town in Indiana. Replication of these promising findings in a second trial in another setting would be desirable to confirm the initial results and establish that they generalize to other settings where the program might be implemented.

Description of the intervention:

RFL is a diversion program for first- or second-time juvenile offenders with nonviolent records. RFL is designed to foster virtuous character development in at-risk adolescents through personal mentoring relationships and group discussion. Youth in the program study selected works of literature in reading groups of up to five participants, which meet twice a week for ten weeks. The reading groups are led by trained volunteer mentors. The 60-minute sessions consist of oral readings, journaling questions, and facilitated discussions of lessons about living virtuously that are drawn from the literature. The program culminates in a one-day community service project and a final presentation to parents and program staff. The mentors who lead the groups attend quarterly meetings to receive ongoing training and supervision. The program costs roughly $1,000 per participant.[1]

Study design:

The sample included 408 youth (ages 11 to 18) arrested between June 2010 and December 2013 in St. Joseph County, Indiana. After obtaining youths' consent to participate, the study randomly assigned 194 youth to receive RFL and 214 to a control group required to complete 25 hours of community service (the

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[1] For this study, the average cost of managing a juvenile in the control group was $300, so the marginal cost of RFL per participant was $700.

county's standard diversion program).[2] The primary outcome—re-arrest—was measured with juvenile arrest data from the St. Joseph County Juvenile Justice Center as well as Indiana state public records on adult arrests leading to a court appearance. These data were acquired in May 2014, allowing for a follow-up period of between four to 46 months depending on the date of a given youth's arrest.

Key findings:

The study found that the program produced sizable effects on re-arrests. During the study follow-up period (four to 46 months after random assignment as described above), 30 percent of RFL youth were re-arrested versus 38 percent of the control group (p<0.10, near statistical significance), and 15 percent of RFL youth were re-arrested for a felony offense versus 22 percent of the control group (p<0.05, statistically significant). In the subsample of 262 youth who were enrolled early in the study period and for whom longer-term follow-up data were therefore available, 23 percent of RFL youth were re-arrested during the two years after random assignment versus 37 percent of the control group (p<0.05, statistically significant). For felony offenses, these figures were 16 percent versus 24 percent, respectively (p<0.10, near statistical significance).

Summary of study quality:

This was a well-conducted RCT. The study used an intent-to-treat analysis that appropriately included all youth in their assigned group regardless of whether they completed the program. The study's analysis also controlled for youth characteristics and accounted for the fact that the ratio of youth randomly assigned to the RFL versus the control group was somewhat lower in the first year of the study than in subsequent years. Due to the use of county and state arrest records to measure outcomes, no study participants were lost to follow-up.

The study had two limitations. First, although the study reported that the RFL and control groups were highly similar in in key demographic characteristics (*e.g.*, ethnicity, age, family background), it did not report on whether the two groups were also similar in pre-program levels of delinquency. Doing so would have helped confirm whether random assignment succeeded in creating two equivalent groups. In addition, the study was conducted in a single town in Indiana. Replication of the study's findings in another RCT in another location would be desirable to confirm the initial results and to establish that they generalize to other settings where the program might be implemented.

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[2] Due to a limited number of volunteer mentors in year one, the probability of a youth being assigned to RFL was 33 percent in 2010 and 50 percent in subsequent years.