

Processes of Resilience Among African-American Youth At-Risk for Delinquency

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Project Description: This study is designed to assess processes of resilience among at-risk African-American youth who are participants of the Family Network Partnership (FNP). The FNP is a community-based program that focuses on youth and their families residing in a 175-unit Hattiesburg public housing project and the surrounding neighborhood. Poverty, inner-city residence, substandard education, inadequate health care, and single-parent, female-headed households are conditions many of these youth are currently experiencing. Existing data indicate that these youth are at increased risk for poor school performance, dropping out of school, penetrating the juvenile justice system, high dependence on social welfare services, and inconsistent, low-wage employment.¹ Yet, in spite of such difficult circumstances, some of these youth appear to develop and function appropriately. These youth are the subject of the study.

Significance. The nature and scope of the risk experienced by these youth is probably underestimated significantly. Existing empirical literature suggests that the same may be true about factors involved in the protection of these youth. Without an understanding of protective factors and the processes involved in protecting these youth from risk, the potential for preventing delinquency is severely hampered. The eventual cost of overlooking potentially effective interventive methods (based on identified protective processes) can be calculated in the diminished psychological health of the youth, as well as the enormous costs associated with increased rates of delinquency.² Understandably, preventing delinquency among these youth is not only a local, but a national priority. An examination of factors protecting these at-risk youth will significantly aid in the development of effective delinquency programs.

Long Term Goals. The goal of this study is to better understand how these youth develop when confronted with difficult life circumstances. Additionally, this study supports three long term goals of this researcher: 1) developing and implementing services that are most effective in enhancing the overall well-being of at risk children and youth (beginning with youth at the FNP); 2) expanding the current state of knowledge on the processes of risk and resilience; and 3) developing a Research Center for the Study of and Service to At-Risk Populations.

Objectives. The objectives of this study are to: 1) identify and define specific factors these youth perceive as placing them at increased risk for juvenile delinquency; 2) identify and define factors these youth perceive as protecting them from the specific risks that they have identified; and 3) identify and define the processes (mechanisms) involved in the protection from the risk factors.

Present State of Knowledge. In the past two decades, research related to resilience generally has occurred in four stages: 1) identification of a risk factor as a cause of concern; 2) analysis of the causes and consequences of the risk; 3) recognition that not all individuals respond in the same way to the same threat and that not all are equally negatively impacted; and 4) research on protective factors that have been incorporated into intervention programs.³ The third stage is reached with problems that have been the subject of intensive research for quite a

while, such as juvenile delinquency. While much has been written on what constitutes significant risk for delinquency,⁴ much less empirical attention⁵ has been directed to identifying and defining protective factors and processes, all of which are necessary to move to the fourth stage.

Plan of Research. During Spring 1999, this researcher will: 1) further define the procedures for implementing the study at the FNP (the directors have already endorsed this study and approved access to the at-risk youth); and 2) obtain the IRB approval from USM. In the first part of Summer 1999, a pilot study including 3 - 5 youth will be conducted to refine the study instruments. The primary activity during the summer will be the intensive life-history interviews. Processing and analysis of the data will be completed by the end of the summer.

Methods and Procedures. A purposive sampling procedure will be used to select approximately 15 - 20 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 that are deemed to be at increased risk, though not engaged in delinquent activities. Potential study participants will be identified and referred to this researcher by the Coordinator of the FNP. The structured interviews with each participant will take between 3 - 5 hours and will be audio-taped and transcribed. Analysis will be completed using standard qualitative procedures.

Dissemination. First, the findings will be presented to study participants. Second, a report and presentation will be provided to the FNP. Third, this study and its findings will be presented in the graduate social work research course (SWK 617) as an example of qualitative research. Next, the findings will be presented at a national level professional conference. Further, the data will be used for comparative purposes with data previously collected by this researcher on other at-risk populations, and included in a book (in the conceptual stages) on overcoming adversity. Finally, the data will be used in grant development to fund a larger scale study of these youth.

Expected Date of Completion of the Project. Collection, processing, and analysis of data will be completed by the end of August, 1999.

¹City of Hattiesburg, (1993, October 12). City of Hattiesburg police hiring supplement program. Hattiesburg, MS.

²Edelman, M (1994). Introduction. In Children's Defense Fund, Wasting America's future. pp. xv-xxix). Boston: Beacon Press.

³Engle, P. L., Castle, S, & Menon, P. (1996). Child development: Vulnerability and Resilience. Sociology Science and Medicine, 43(5), pp. 621-635.

⁴Forster, M. & McCarthy, K (1995). The aggression treatment project. Contributions to Residential Treatment. Alexandria, VA: Association of Children's Residential Centers.

⁵Howell, J.C., Krisberg, B., Hawkins, J., & Wilson, J. (1995). Serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offender: A sourcebook. Sage Publications.