

RESEARCH BRIEF

American Society of Evidence-Based Policing

MAY
2019

Are Well-Meaning Interventions Effective? Maybe, But Effective Doesn't Always Mean Beneficial.

Research often reports the positives of certain social programs, or at least whether the program works or not. However, research rarely reports when social programs actually do harm. It isn't enough that we study whether programs simply work, we also need to ask if they cause harm to the communities they are meant to serve.

Joan McCord, a criminal justice professor from Temple University, in her report titled "Cures That Harm: Unanticipated Outcomes of Crime Prevention Programs," outlines the importance of studying the harms that can be caused by social interventions. She notes that peer-reviewed journals are more likely to accept studies that reinforce popular opinions. This is commonly referred to as "publication bias" and is partly driven by fear that if one social program is viewed as harmful, then they all may be perceived as tainted.

One of the studies McCord focuses on is the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study, which took place in Massachusetts. The designer of the study used a scientific approach that aimed to not only target the causes of crime but would also allow for the evaluation of the intervention. The hypothesis was that youths who come from disadvantaged homes could be steered away from delinquency if a counselor from outside of their own family gave

them guidance, support, and friendship. The researchers used a sound technique, random selection, to avoid bias. Similarly situated participants were allocated to pairs and were then divided into a treatment group and a control group - the idea being that if not for the treatment, the participants in the treatment group would turn out similarly to those in the control group. Following the evaluations of the participants, it was reported that both the treatment group and the control group had seen improvements that were not anticipated. A few years later, they were studied again and it was found that some in the control group were actually doing better than those in the treatment group.

McCord tracked the participants as they reached middle age and surveyed them. Many of the participants in the treatment group reported that the program helped them become law abiding citizens and put them "on the right track." However, when McCord tracked court, death, and mental health records, she found that the majority of pairs had no measured effect in outcomes. Furthermore, **many in the treatment group** were more likely to have been **convicted of a serious crime, die younger, and were more likely to be diagnosed with alcoholism, schizophrenia, and manic depression.** McCord stresses that the program **was effective** in that it had lasting effects,

RESEARCH BRIEF

American Society of Evidence-Based Policing

but those effects were harmful, not beneficial.

Other interventions also proved to be counterproductive. For example, court volunteers are common in many US courts, but only a few of these programs are evaluated. For one of the programs that was evaluated, it was found that **those who received treatment** from volunteers ended up **committing more crimes** than those who did not receive the treatment. Another program, group interaction training, focused on developing the social skills of potential delinquents by giving them opportunities to discuss issues with positive role models. Research on the program showed that for middle school aged children, there was no effect - **but for high school aged participants misbehavior and delinquency rates increased.** Similar results were found for studies evaluating the impact of activities and scared straight programs.

McCord concludes with a few important points:

It is hard to find evidence reporting harmful effects of social programs because there is strong bias against reporting negative effects.

Some authors that fail to find evidence of beneficial outcomes of social programs don't bother to submit their reports for publication.

Those who do submit reports outlining harmful effects of social programs tend to receive delays or rejections due to the evidence they provide.

When attempting to implement programs, a dataset containing reviews of high-quality research and evaluation of programs would help make informed decisions.

TAKEAWAY

Readers of peer-reviewed journals must be aware of publication bias that seeks to report only the beneficial effects of social programs while ignoring possible social harms.

Continued evaluations of programs are necessary as the effects of a program may change as demographics, definitions, places, and practices change.

Without scientifically credible evaluations, we cannot learn which programs are beneficial and which are harmful.

Although we have good intentions without proper evaluation we have no idea whether we are benefiting or harming society.

Reference:

Joan McCord (2003) Cures That Harm: Unanticipated Outcomes of Crime Prevention Programs. The ANNALS of American Academy of Political and Social Science. 16-30.