
CHALLENGE #4: IDENTIFY AND INTERVENE INTENSIVELY WITH YOUTH AT EXTREME RISK FOR CHRONIC DELINQUENCY

“The lack of consistent intervention with juvenile offenders soon after their initial contact with the police or other authorities has long been recognized as perhaps the single largest gap in services for troubled youth.”²³

National Council on Crime and Delinquency

In 1972, Marvin Wolfgang and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania published a seminal study, *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*, which tracked delinquency and criminal behavior among ten thousand Philadelphians born in 1945 throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood.²⁴ Wolfgang repeated the analysis with more than 25,000 youth born in 1958, and in recent years several more cohort studies have been conducted by other criminologists.²⁵ In each of these studies, a small group of boys – just six to eight percent – committed the majority of all serious and violent juvenile crimes. For instance, Wolfgang’s second analysis found that seven percent of Philadelphia youth committed 61 percent of all offenses, 65 percent of all aggravated assaults, 60 percent of homicides, 75 percent of rapes, and 73 percent of robberies.²⁶ The implications are obvious: ***To be effective in reducing youth crime, prevention and intervention efforts must target those young people at highest risk to become chronic offenders.***

More recently, delinquency scholars have identified clear developmental pathways that children follow on the way to becoming chronic delinquents and then adult criminals. Experts have isolated critical “risk” and “protective” factors that influence whether or not a young person will turn to delinquency and – if they do – whether they will

persist in criminal behavior over time. Also, juvenile justice agencies have consistently found that young people arrested at an early age are far more likely than other youth to become chronic juvenile offenders. Together, these findings make it possible for juvenile courts and juvenile justice agencies to identify early those youth who are at extreme risk for serious delinquency – and then to develop intensive programming targeting these highest-risk youth.

However, the reality throughout our nation is that few local juvenile justice systems take the time to assess objectively the risk of re-offending for first-time youthful offenders – even for second- or third- or seventh-time offenders – provided they have not yet committed a crime serious enough to spark the attention of a juvenile court prosecutor, judge or probation officer. The result, writes the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, is an “all-too-common pattern: several encounters with authorities; short-term detentions with no coherent, intensive interventions; repeated offenses; and eventual incarceration in juvenile and adult correctional facilities.”²⁷

In recent years, a handful of jurisdictions have begun to break that pattern. Beginning with Orange County, CA, these trailblazers are showing that chronic criminal careers can be nipped in the bud.

NIPPING CRIMINAL CAREERS IN THE BUD THE 8 PERCENT SOLUTION, ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

As research director for the Orange County, California Probation Department in the late 1980s, Gwen Kurz began studying the county's young offender population. The good news, she found, was that 70 percent of Orange County youth referred to juvenile court never returned, and another 22 percent came back only once or twice within three years. However, there was a small group – 8 percent of all offenders ever referred to juvenile court – who appeared four or more times within three years. These chronic offenders committed more than half of all repeat juvenile crimes. They reappeared in juvenile or adult court an average of eight times in the six years following their initial referral to juvenile court, and nearly all committed at least one very serious and/or violent crime. The chronic offenders were incarcerated an average of 20 months over the three years at a cost of \$44,000 each.²⁸

Kurz and her boss, Michael Schumacher, then began looking for traits that would predict these chronic offenders at the first offense. They found that the youth most likely to become chronic delinquents differed from other juvenile offenders in two ways. First, those arrested at a young age (before 16) were far more likely than other youth offenders to become chronic delinquents. Second, youth who exhibited multiple problems – family discord, school failure, substance abuse, and/or pre-delinquent behavior – were at highest risk for recurring lawbreaking.

Based on this research, Orange County developed an intensive intervention program for youth meeting the “8 percent” profile. Specifically, the county created an objective assessment instrument to determine which young people referred to juvenile court on delinquency charges were: a) first-time offenders; b) 15 or younger; and c) suffering three or more risk factors. The county then placed youth who met these criteria into an all-day program operating five days per week. The county monitored the success of the likely chronic offenders and found that only 49 percent suffered subsequent adjudications in the 12 months after

enrollment, barely half the historic re-arrest rate (93 percent) for youth with the same profile.²⁹

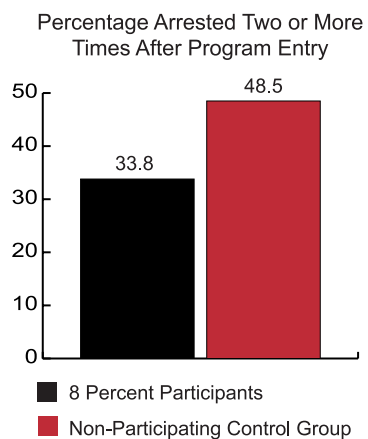
Based on this initial success, Orange County has expanded the program to serve 350 youth county-wide, and it is utilizing a rigorous evaluation design to compare the outcomes for extreme-risk youth enrolled in the program with outcomes for youth with equivalent profiles who are randomly assigned to conventional juvenile court services and sanctions. Preliminary results are highly favorable, making Orange County's “8 Percent Solution” one of the most promising models in our nation's evolving efforts to bring adolescent crime under control.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL “8 PERCENT YOUTH”

As part of its strategic planning efforts preparing to enter the 1990s, the Orange County Probation Department analyzed two cohorts of more than 3,000 youthful offenders – one comprised of youth who entered the county's juvenile justice system for the first time during the first half of 1985, the other entering during the first half of 1987. After determining that only a small number (i.e., 8 percent) were chronic offenders, Kurz and Schumacher pored over the data to identify characteristics that would identify these potential chronic offenders early.

“There will never be enough money, people, or programs to solve all the problems faced by each youth in our society. In the fight against juvenile crime, we must focus our efforts on the group with the greatest potential to burden and victimize society and the ones most likely to fail in life. This group cries out for our attention.”

**"8 PERCENT SOLUTION" PROGRAM,
ORANGE COUNTY, CA
IMPACT ON MULTIPLE RE-OFFENDING***



* Analysis based on juveniles who had reached their 12-month post-assignment date as of June 30, 2000.

Source: Data provided via e-mail by Ms. Shirley Hunt, Orange County Probation Department, December 2000.

One factor jumped out right away: *age*. The data revealed that 57 percent of all chronic offenders were 15 or younger when they were first adjudicated. Moreover, youth first adjudicated at age 15 or younger were four times as likely (32 percent) to become chronic offenders as youth first adjudicated at ages 16 or above (8 percent).

Finding additional factors proved more complex, because (other than age) no single problem or characteristic could be found in all or most chronic offenders. However, the data did show that *future chronic offenders displayed an unusually wide range of difficulties during their initial screening interviews*. Based on this finding, the county crafted a “Multi-Problem Factor” to identify problems in four domains:

- ◆ **School performance/behavior**, including attendance problems (truancy or frequent absenteeism); behavior problems (recent suspensions or expulsions); and/or academic failure (failing grades).
- ◆ **Family problem factor**, including poor parental supervision/control (parent[s] unaware of where child goes, with whom, etc., and report

little influence over these matters); significant family problems (illness, substance abuse, trauma, financial crisis, etc.); criminal family members exerting influence on the youth; and/or documented child abuse or neglect, or other family violence.

- ◆ **Substance abuse factor**, including any use beyond experimentation.
- ◆ **Delinquency factor**, including pattern of stealing, pattern of running away from home, and/or gang membership or affiliation.

Remarkably, among youth suffering with problems in three or more of these domains who were referred to juvenile court before age 16, 93 percent became chronic offenders.

THE “8 PERCENT” PROGRAM MODEL

Once Orange County had developed the screening tools to identify likely chronic offenders in their initial contact with the juvenile court, the next challenge was to design an intervention program that would effectively steer these youth away from delinquency.

County staff scoured the research literature regarding what works with juvenile offenders and other troubled adolescents. Then they decided upon a multi-pronged approach centered around a new “Youth and Family Resource Center.” Core elements of the approach include:

- ◆ **All-day academic and youth development programming**. All youth are picked up at or near their homes every morning and delivered to one of five Youth and Family Resource Centers operated by the county Probation Department. Once there, participants spend most of the morning receiving academic instruction from county board of education teachers. In the afternoons, students typically participate in recreation, study hall, community service projects or life skills workshops.

John, Rudy, and the Case for Early Intervention

“They both run from a liquor store with six-packs of beer, only to fall into the waiting arms of store security staff. Both are ordered by the court to pick up trash for 10 weekends as their punishment. So long as this is done, their relationship with juvenile court concludes until the next offense, if there is one.

“Rudy is a potential 8 percenter, whereas John is not. John’s family is outraged at his behavior and takes appropriate steps to deal with it, restricting him to home for weeks and taking away television privileges. John is embarrassed by the whole episode and never again steps over the line of criminal behavior.

“Rudy’s problems are much larger than stealing a six-pack of beer. The weekend trash duty will not turn him around. He ditches school, abuses drugs, and hangs around with other kids who do the same. His parents have little or no impact on his life, so there is no ‘righting of the ship’ after his first brush with the law.

“The juvenile justice system may not pay much attention to Rudy until crime number three or four, unless he seriously victimizes someone. By then, however, bad habits will have been formed. It is often much too late.”

Excerpt from The 8% Solution: Preventing Serious, Repeat Juvenile Crime (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), by Michael Schumacher and Gwen Kurz.

- ◆ **Family involvement and counseling.** In addition to teachers, each Youth and Family Resource Center (serving 30-60 youth) is staffed with two therapists trained in both individual and family counseling, two in-home counselors from a private counseling agency, a county drug/alcohol specialist who counsels both youth and their parents, a nurse practitioner who helps the entire family secure needed medical care, and 4.5 full-time staff from a community-based agency providing parent education, teen parenting training, and community service programming for youth and their families.
- ◆ **Focus on substance abuse.** Because roughly two-thirds of Orange County’s “8 Percent” youth abuse drugs and/or alcohol, the program offers every participant at least one hour of substance abuse education or counseling every week. Youth known to regularly abuse substances or come from families where substance abuse is problematic receive more

in-depth treatment, as well as drug testing and home inspections from county probation staff.

MEASURING SUCCESS – THE “8 PERCENT” DIVIDEND

Since 1997, Orange County has been participating in a rigorous evaluation of its intervention program for potential chronic offenders. After completing a screening interview to determine whether first time offenders meet the criteria for participation in the program – i.e., below 16 with three or more problem areas – the county randomly assigned some youth to the program and others to a control group receiving normal court services and sanctions. Initial results from this evaluation indicate that the program is significantly reducing the offending behavior of extreme-risk youth.

Among the 71 youth who completed the program by June 30, 1999, 33.8 percent committed two or more offenses in the 12 months after program entry.

By contrast, 48.5 percent of control group youth not placed into the program committed two or more offenses during the 12-month period. (See Table #4.) In addition, participating youth have had fewer new court petitions, fewer arrest warrants, and spent fewer days in custody than control group youth in the first 12 months.³⁰ The “8 Percent” intervention program is also proving cost-effective. With a cost of \$14,000 per individual per year, the intervention is substantially reducing future costs for incarceration as well as damages suffered by would-be victims of future crimes.

Based on the success of Orange County’s preliminary efforts, the California legislature has funded a Repeat Offender Prevention Project since 1996 to continue the program in Orange County and to replicate and test the early intervention concept in seven other jurisdictions statewide. These programs, too, include a rigorous, control-group evaluation design, and results of these

programs also find that youth enrolled in targeted, intensive early intervention services are committing substantially fewer felony crimes than youth assigned to control groups. Participating youth are also failing drug tests far less often, and they are earning significantly more school credits and higher grades than non-participating youth.³¹

Though the early intervention concept is still alien to juvenile justice agencies in most jurisdictions nationwide, a handful of states and communities are beginning to study and replicate this promising approach. As Kurz and Schumacher explain, the logic behind the strategy is obvious: “There will never be enough money, people, or programs to solve all the problems faced by each youth in our society. In the fight against juvenile crime, we must focus our efforts on the group with the greatest potential to burden and victimize society and the ones most likely to fail in life. This group cries out for our attention.”³²

Operating Agency	Orange County Probation Department
Program Type	County-Run Delinquency Intervention Program
Program Goals	Reduce Chronic Offending by High Risk Youth
Target Group	Juvenile offenders 15 and younger who demonstrate high risk for chronic delinquency
Key Strategies	Screening first-time juvenile offenders to identify those at extreme risk chronic delinquency, intensive day treatment for potential chronic offenders
Primary Funding Source(s)	Orange County, California Board of Corrections
Evidence of Effectiveness	Participants demonstrate significantly lower arrest rates than similar youth receiving conventional probation services
Contact Information	Jeff Corp, Director of Community Programs Orange County Probation Department 160 W. Cerritos Ave., Building #4 Anaheim, CA 98205 Phone: (714) 687-6703; Fax: (714) 533-6884