

K-State Sociology Graduate Students Research Improving Probation for Juvenile Offenders

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To: State Desk

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MANHATTAN, Kan. Nov. 8 /U.S. Newswire/

-- Two Kansas State University graduate students in sociology have found that placing juvenile offenders from Riley County through a nontraditional probation program has helped reduce the number of rearrests.

The results showed that juveniles who were placed in this program, which emphasizes their strengths rather than their shortfalls, were able to accomplish goals they established. This contributed to the program's success.

"What sets apart this approach from traditional probation/corrections formats is that it uses what a person does well to affect behavior change," said Travis Linnemann, graduate student in sociology, Manhattan. "Traditional forms often use the 'you will do this or else' model, and often this threat of jail becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Our argument is that this nontraditional approach offers a new, less coercive, more supportive avenue to affect behavior change in delinquent youth."

Linnemann and Don Kurtz, graduate student in sociology, Manhattan, did a study comparing local juveniles on standard probation to juveniles on nontraditional probation. The pair set out to determine how this nontraditional approach compared to the traditional correctional program.

The traditional program is a forceful model, concerned with crime control and public safety, that looks at juvenile's shortfalls, rather than looking at their strengths.

The United States has seen delinquency rates and juvenile crimes become a significant social problem over the past 20 years, Linnemann said. In addition to finding the program helped reduce rearrests, he said the program also pointed out that youth who set too many goals were more likely to fail than youth who set smaller, more attainable goals.

"Establishing too many or unreasonable goals increases the likelihood of failure at the onset of a difficulty," Linnemann said, "or not being able to accomplish goals may enhance an already existing atmosphere of failure."

While the program was designed to deal with behavior difficulties during and after arrest, the program also has been expanded to help youth who are exhibiting behaviors such as truancy, curfew violations or uncontrollability, but have not been arrested.

The program was funded by grants and evaluated juveniles over a three-year period. It was recently expanded from one to two case managers. The case managers work with the juveniles to set up the attainable goals.

The program was recommended by the community planning team in 1997 to define what services were important for Riley County. It is a locally driven, developed and maintained, grass-roots approach to delinquency, Linnemann said.

Linnemann is the federal programs supervisor at Riley County Community Corrections and manages a small, specialized caseload of high-risk youth. He also has been a probation officer. Kurtz currently works for Riley County Community Corrections as a research specialist on another project.

The study and its results will be published in The Western Criminology Review in November.

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