

## Resiliency in Adolescent Males in a Correctional Facility

The objective of this qualitative study was to establish the existing positive factors in the lives of 18 juvenile males living in a low-security correctional facility in order to determine approaches which foster resiliency. Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, an approach to understanding human development within the context of the systems of relationship that form in the individual's environment, was the framework in which resiliency theory was examined.

This study substantiated the existence of individual and environmental factors of resiliency. While it is optimal when all systems are supportive of the individual, it is not a prerequisite of resiliency.

Internal resilient factors found in the program included building positive identity and having future expectations. Each of the adolescent males expressed qualities integrated in a positive self-concept. Although few boys believed they excelled in academics they were all able to find areas in which they excelled. The older boys were beginning to plan careers for their future and all boys wanted to earn their high school diploma.

External resilient factors included consistency, structure, support, and good relationships between the adults in their lives. The staff at the correctional facility offered a consistent, structured daily schedule and gave emotional support. A behavior plan, based on positive behavior supports, Anger Management classes, and counseling supported the boys abilities to problem solve and attain social skills. The boys believed the program valued helping others, but few of them showed evidence of being empathetic. Many of the boys did not consider their peers as friends because of the revolving door nature of the correctional system; therefore the adults became extremely important influences. Recommendations to foster resiliency in adolescents in correctional facilities were made based upon the research.

## Resiliency in Adolescent Males in a Correctional Facility

Joe is 17 years old and is currently incarcerated in a low-security juvenile correctional facility. This is a well-worn pattern in Joe's life; he has repeatedly been incarcerated since he was 12 years old. He comes from a dysfunctional family where parental rights were terminated when he was 14 years old and he is now a ward of the state. He's been diagnosed with depression and is a slow learner. Joe's environment is filled with at-risk forces; even so, he is on track to receive his high school diploma and has future plans to attend JOB Corps where he will receive work training. The teachers and correctional personnel agree that Joe has a good chance of becoming a productive member of society.

John, on the other hand, is quite candid in his plans to return to the gang and drugs that were part of his lifestyle before he came to the correctional facility. During school, which is mandatory for all the boys in the facility, he refuses to engage in any work and instead is disruptive and often aggressive toward teachers, line staff, and his peers. More than one adult at the facility has predicted that John will end up in prison.

Joe seems to be beating the odds, possessing some of the qualities necessary to escape the system, while John seems destined to live his life in corrections. Both boys' lives are filled with at-risk conditions, but despite the odds one seems to be resilient.

The objective of this qualitative study was to establish the existing positive factors in the lives of 18 juvenile males living in a low-security correctional facility in order to determine the traits and characteristics important for successful interaction with their environment. The study included an attempt at discovering approaches which help to foster resiliency amongst adolescents in corrections. Referring to the definition of

Bernard Cesarone (1999), resiliency is “the human capacity and ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity” (p. 12). Relying on this definition and additional information, a basis of which to compare and contrast the data collected to existing research was established.

The Search Institute of the University of Minneapolis identified 40 scientifically based experiences, relationships, opportunities, skills and character traits that form a foundation for resilient adolescents. The Search Institute’s Framework of Developmental Assets (1994) fall into eight categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity. The eight developmental categories are divided between external assets and internal assets. Internal assets examine the development of the individual, their values, identity formation, interactions with others, decision making abilities and inner strength. The external assets consider the positive experiences the person has with the people in their community; including the support of family, friends, and school, mutual respect, safety, and a useful role in the community (Search Institute, 2004).

Research conducted by the Search Institute is corroborated with guidelines that have been established by those who work with youth in education, youth development, and human services. Bonnie Benard (1997), an expert in the field, believes all humans are resilient by nature. Her research suggests that people have an innate ability to adjust to new experiences and situations. This ability to transform oneself is then supported by caring relationships, high expectations of significant people in our lives and opportunities

for participation. The final step in her resiliency theory is empowerment of the individual by allowing them to contribute to family and community.

Considering that the immediate environment of the individuals under study was a correctional facility, it was only appropriate to include research conducted on the essential components of resiliency for juveniles in correctional facilities. Experts believe structure, an appropriate education program, and positive guidance and socialization with adults were essential in building resiliency in at-risk youth (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, D'Ambrosio, 2001 & Brendtro and Cunningham, 1998).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is an approach to understanding human development within the context of the system of relationships that form in the individual's environment. This theory offers a framework in which resiliency theory can be examined. Bronfenbrenner's theory is composed of five complex layers which create a complete picture of a person's environment. Direct and indirect influences are defined and the relationships that exist between these influences are identified.

Beginning with the direct influences in an individual's life is the microsystem. It includes the personal relationships as well as other relationships one has in their immediate surrounding. Examples of the microsystem include the family, local neighborhood and institutions such as school, religious organizations, peer groups and the specific culture with which one's family identifies. Traditionally, this is where the lion's share of research has been conducted (Huitt, 2002).

The next layer is the mesosystem, which is composed of the relationships between the members of the microsystem. It examines the impact intermediate levels of

influences have on the individual, such as the relationship between the parents and peers or the relationship between peers and teachers. For instance, if parents and teachers have a positive relationship this will influence the teenager, equipping them to perform better in the school setting (Huitt, 2002).

The third layer, the exosystem is comprised of the indirect influences on one's life such as a parent's work schedule or a community based family resource, such as religious associations. The exosystem involves individuals and agencies that ultimately impact the person, but where they have no direct contact (Paquette, 2001).

The last two layers are the macrosystem and chronosystem. A person's culture, customs and laws are explored in the macrosystem. Messages sent by the media of what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior and societal reactions to juvenile crime are two of the influences found in the macrosystem. Change or consistency of any element affecting an individual's life over a long period of time encompasses the chronosystem (Paquette, 2001). Examples of the chronosystem include economic recessions and depressions, increases in divorce rates and the individual's own internal development.

## Methodology

### Setting and Participants

This study involved individual interviews with 18 juvenile males in a low security correctional facility. The program detained juveniles from the states of South Dakota and Minnesota. The participating students were ages 12 – 18 years old, and enrolled in grades 7 – 12. All boys were court ordered to the facility and all were repeat offenders. The crimes committed by the participants involved sex offences, drug and alcohol abuse, and

vandalism. Length of placement varied from two weeks to one year, with the majority of boys residing in the facility for five to eight months.

Five of the boys were wards of the state and had court appointed surrogate parents. Contact with family members was rare for all boys in the facility. Four students were African Americans, two were Native Americans, one was Mong and eleven were Caucasians. The participants had attended multiple schools before attending the school in the correctional facility. The majority of boys were not attending school on a regular basis prior to their conviction and sentence to the facility.

The facility offered year round school for the boys. Participation in school was a requirement of the program; therefore, the attendance rate was 100%. The curriculum focused on reading, writing and math, social studies and science. A concerted effort was made to integrate the content with real life experiences. Life skills, social skills, anger management and drug counseling were also an integral part of the academic day. The school did not offer a diploma, but instead students earned academic credits that were reported to their home school districts. All boys left the program in pursuit of their high school diploma or a GED. Graduation rates were unattainable because of the difficulty in tracking the boys once they left the program.

Academically, the students were working below grade level. Teacher evaluations reported all students in the study were one year or more behind in math, reading and writing. Five of the participants were Minnesota residents where a requirement for high school graduation was the Minnesota Basic Standards Tests in reading, writing, and math. In 2004, three boys took the writing test and all three passed the test. Two boys took the reading test and none passed. Of the four students that took

the math proficiency test, one passed. While these results were encouraging, none of the boys had passed the proficiency tests the first time they were offered.

#### Data Collection

Interview questions were developed by the lead researcher using a literature review of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Subsystems and the Search Institutes Risk and Resiliency Theory. The questions were then refined by two teachers in the correctional facility and three education and one psychology major undergraduates. The four undergraduates had senior status and they assisted in interviewing of boys. The lead researcher and the undergraduates met twice to review the questions and discuss the interview process.

The following is a sampling of interview questions:

#### Microsystem

1. Who are your role models? Why?
2. Do you have plans for the future?

#### Mesosystem

1. What do your friends say about school?
2. How do your line staff and teachers work together?

#### Exosystem

1. Does your program have support for people that have problems?
2. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very unimportant and 5 being very important) how do you think your program values having a job? An education?

#### Macrosystem

1. What laws are important to your community (outside the facility)?

2. Do people feel safe in your community (outside the facility)?

#### Chronosystem

1. Drug abuse is a growing problem in the United States – how does it impact you?
2. How do national juvenile crime rates affect you?

Students were also given a realistic scenario to determine their level of empathy:

What do you see as your role when a new student enters the facility? The ability to problem-solve was examined through the participants action plan when given a potential fight situation.

The participants were interviewed one time for approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken.

#### Data Analysis

The researchers met and discussed statements from the interviews that related to Bronfenbrenner's subsystems and risk and resiliency theory. Each researcher independently chose significant quotes from their interviews with the students to support their thoughts. Collaboratively the researchers attempted to form themes and relationships between the statements that were made during the interview sessions.

### Results

#### Microsystem

The main areas examined within the microsystem were self-concept, future expectations, family and other adult support, levels of empathy and problem-solving ability. Each of the adolescent males expressed qualities included in a positive self-concept. Every boy was able to identify a skill in which they achieved. Although few of them mentioned excelling in academics; they did state achievement in skills they valued,

such as drawing, sewing (needle-pointing sports logos), and sports in general. One boy proudly stated, "I'm good at everything (in sports), I will succeed if I try." Within the program, the boys also found positive support from the adults at the facility. Referring to one of the teachers a boy said, "Mrs. N is so excited for me. There aren't too many things I'm good at, but I'm starting to get good at [sewing]." A combination of self-esteem and esteem of others was noted in the interviews.

In addition to a positive self-concept, many of the males held high expectations for their future. The majority of boys wanted to earn their high school diploma; "I hope to go back to school, and then make some money so I can go to college so I can become an architect or work in auto-mechanics." Other future expectations include wanting to be an archeologist, an NBA player, a fighter pilot, and a professional racecar driver. As can be seen, some goals were more realistic than others, this correlated with the developmental level of the boy. The younger boys tended to have more unrealistic goals – NBA player or fighter pilot while the older boys had more realistic career goals. The program supported their future goals by inviting military recruiters, JOB Corps representatives and technical school employees as guest speakers to the facility. Many boys found these opportunities meaningful and discussed their desire to join the JOB Corps or military.

Family support was minimal, questionable, and very unstable. Even so, many of the interviewees stated that family and their support was the most important element in their life. "I need my support from my family and friends to change my ways. I'm pretty lucky to have my family 'cause a lot of the guys here don't get to see their families. I'm pretty lucky," is an example of the value placed on family. Many of their family

members were considered role models by the boys. However, many of these relatives were not positive influences and were often the cause of their incarceration. For example, “my role model is my uncle because he got me into gang-banging.”

Fortunately, the professional staff at the correctional facility offered a positive support system for the males through a consistent, structured daily schedule and by also giving emotional support. The boys regarded many of the adults as caring individuals as evidenced in the following remark, “I don’t really like Mr. W., but I really like the way he works. He treats us with respect and doesn’t want the boys to ever have to come back here” and Mrs. N. “worries about us, doesn’t want us to act bad, wants us to learn.”

Other boys chose role models they could vicariously live through. One boy chose Jeff Gordon, the NASCAR driver, his strong connection to this man can be seen in his quote, “(Jeff Gordon) young and fights for what he believes and wants. Rookie of the pack, I’m always the small one just like him.” He was able to relate to the qualities he admired in his role model.

In addition, the correctional facility offered problem solving strategies through anger management classes, counseling, a behavior plan, and a Positive Peer Culture program. The structure of the behavior program, known as the Strike Program, was particularly significant in the boys’ success at the facility. Boys were given negative consequences for inappropriate behavior (loss of free time, no TV privileges) and rewards (free-time, phone calls, supervised trips off campus) for appropriate behavior. Once a boy earned a reward for good behavior it could not be removed, if a boy engaged in inappropriate behavior they received a negative consequence, but any earned privilege remained intact – in this way there was always an incentive to exhibit good

behavior. As one boy explained, “The strike system is a good program, it works, it lets peers know they can work toward something.”

The Positive Peer Culture program required the boys to be responsible for one another’s behavior. Each person was responsible for the well-being of the entire group. This involved following directions as well as bringing attention to problems as they arose and then resolving the issue as a group. The majority of boys looked to responsibilities outlined in this program when dealing with the scenario regarding a new student in the facility. Little empathy was shown by any of the boys for the new person, it was generally thought if the new boy were, “my attachment, I was assigned to them, I would help them” otherwise they felt little compassion or need to help the new boy. That being said, if they were assigned the new student each boy was willing to take on the responsibility as prescribed by the program.

Many of the adolescents did not feel the Anger Management Classes were a support as much as a way to control them. It was not generally perceived as something that would help them in the long run. One boy stated that he just *acts* good and controls his behavior *in* the program. While this class was not seen as beneficial by many of the boys, they applied strategies taught and supported in this class to the fight scenario. The main strategy when encountering a fight was to try and ignore it. The majority of boys didn’t want to fight “for the heck of it.” One boy that has been identified by the staff as exhibiting resilient qualities, confidently stated he would, “walk away. I do it a lot. I have better things to worry about than fighting.”

### **Mesosystem**

Several trends were found in the mesosystem in regards to the relationships between peers and school, significant adults and school, and the collegiality between line-staff and teachers. The majority of the adolescents in the study believed their peers did not like school and in general had a negative perception toward it. While this indirectly influenced the boys' attitudes toward school, the nature of the correctional system may diminish the power of peers. Many boys did not believe they had close friends in the facility, the revolving door nature of the system made it difficult to develop close relationships. This may allow for the adults in their life to have more influence than in regular society. There was a consensus among the boys that line staff valued education greatly and wanted to convey that message to them. They also believed their teachers valued school because "she expects me to get things done."

The majority of the adolescents in the study also believed that the teachers and line staff worked well together, they were a "team." However, the boys felt that most of the work dealt with behavioral issues, not academic concerns. The line staff and teachers encouraged the boys to work hard in school, but they believed the highest priority was improving behavior in order to work through the program. The ability of the adults in the program to work well together built a sense of security and positive climate for the boys.

#### Exosystem

The exosystem questions dealt with things that indirectly impact the adolescents. The adolescents studied perceived little or no support by entities outside their program. They commented on the infrequent contact they had with their judge or Juvenile Corrections Agent (JCA). Many of the boys were frustrated that their phone calls were not returned and they were rarely given information about their sentence.

The unique structure of a correctional site placed the administrators, staff, teachers and line-staff in a position of not only having direct interaction with the boys, but also indirect interaction through the program's general attitudes. In Table 1, adolescents rated on a Likert scale the value they believed their program placed on each of the five categories, with 1 being "very unimportant" and 5 being "very important".

Insert Table 1

As seen in the table, the adolescents felt education was highly valued by the program, with 100% rating it important or very important. The adolescents also felt that their program valued helping others and having a job. The areas of religion and sports/exercise were rated as least significant. Approximately 30% of the boys felt these areas were viewed as either unimportant or very unimportant.

Interestingly, while the boys believed the adults in the program valued helping others, they showed very little empathy for their peers when they were sentenced in court. One boy voiced the opinion of the others when he said, "it's their problem."

Macrosystem

Questions pertaining to the macrosystem included their views on crime in their community, laws, and the importance of certain values in their community. Most boys agreed that there was a great deal of crime outside of the correctional facility. In response to how much crime was in the community one boy responded that there was "quite a bit, cause lots of people are ending up where I am". Drugs, stealing, and curfew violations were what the boys viewed as the most common crimes in their communities. One boy

stated the reason for some crimes was because “music and T.V. make drugs and violence look good. I don’t watch a lot of T.V. here and I think it’s because they (the correctional facility) don’t want us to do drugs when we get out”. When the boys were asked if people were strict or lenient in regard to the laws, many said that it depended on the person. Most boys agreed that laws were around to help prevent crime and protect them.

The following table addresses the boys’ perceptions of their community’s views of various entities. Attitudes are rated on a 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important) Likert scale.

Insert Table 2

The boys’ believed their community valued having a job, with 93% indicating it was important or very important. Receiving an education was also highly valued with 67% rating it as important or very important. Helping other was viewed as the least important value in their community.

Chronosystem

The final questions that the boys were asked were in regards to the chronosystem. These questions focused on how certain issues found in the real world impacted them. The boys were asked how drug abuse in the United States affected them. Almost all of the boys were surrounded and affected by drugs in some way. One said that “there is a big drug problem (in my community)...it affects the kids and I might have a problem staying away from it.” Other boys also said that they were frequently surrounded by this culture and were often pressured to be part of it.

The boys also agreed that juvenile crime was a problem and it affected them in many ways. A common theme among the boys in regard to crime was that what *others* did was stupid but what they did was different. They could perceive others actions as being harmful to others or themselves, but did not consider the far-reaching consequences of their own actions.

### Conclusions

According to resiliency theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study substantiates the existence of individual and environmental factors of resiliency. According to Bronfenbrenner it is optimal when all systems are supportive of the individual, but it is not a prerequisite of resiliency.

The following are program recommendations to foster resiliency in adolescents in correctional facilities:

1. Programs need to be of adequate duration for bonding with the adult individuals in the program.
2. Research based instructional strategies are necessary in the schools to support academics in order to prepare the boys for jobs and encourage a positive identity.
3. Goal setting, and in particular career education, needs to be embedded in the program.
4. Empathy and other social skills must be promoted and supported.
5. Teachers and line-staff require opportunities to meet and confer on a regular basis in order to best serve the students.

6. Facilitating communication between the JCA and boys is desirable, but may be difficult due to the JCA's workload. Building relationships with other institutions in the community: religious organizations, senior centers, and volunteer experiences for the boys were advantageous.

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Table 1: Adolescent's Perceptions of the Program's Attitudes

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Having a job	6%	12%	6%	35%	41%
Education	0	0	0	23%	77%
Religion	7%	20%	26%	27%	20%
Helping others	7%	0	14%	29%	50%
Sports/Exercise	0	33%	13%	20%	34%

Table 2: Adolescents' Perceptions of their Community's Attitudes

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Having a job	7%	0%	0%	26%	67%
Education	13%	13%	7%	7%	60%
Religion	20%	7%	40%	20%	13%
Helping others	20%	20%	27%	13%	20%
Sports/Exercise	13%	13%	13%	34%	27%