

YCRA RESEARCH BRIEF:

RELATIONAL AND PURPOSE DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH OFFENDERS

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Summary: This study explored which risk factors are associated with degrees of relational and purpose development in youth offenders. Results indicate that those with the poorest development particularly struggled with substance abuse, lack of family support, and risky behaviors to self. Several treatment recommendations and clinical strategies are included.

Key Points in the Literature Review:

- During the last 20 years there has been increased interest in developmental concerns, including psychosocial development (Drum & Lawler, 1998; Vernon, 1993).
- Psychosocial development is one of the three domains of development (with cognitive and biological) and includes emotional, personality, and social development with influences of family, community, culture, and the larger society (Berger, 1994).
- An understanding of psychosocial development for adolescents (ages 13-18) is particularly important to counselors because it is probably the most challenging and complicated period of life (Berger, 1994).
- Relating to parents with new independence, relating to friends with new intimacy, and relating to oneself with new understanding are the keys

for attaining adult status and maturity (Berger, 1994).

- Psychosocial development for adolescents can often be difficult, and such development for youth criminal offenders is probably even more challenging (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004).
- A review of the professional literature reveals several studies that address youth offenders and moral development, with effective treatment strategies emerging from the results (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975; Kohlberg, 1978; Samenow, 1998).
- Some studies of youth offenders have explored significant psychosocial problems, such as poor social behaviors (Dishon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Patterson, 1984; Kaplan & Arbuthnot, 1985) and difficulty making friends (Selman & Schultz, 1990).
- Weiss and Lopez (1999) noted that there is an urgency to promote positive youth development, especially with troubled youths.
- Brendtro et al. (1998) noted two major psychosocial developmental “ecological hazards” (p. 8) in the lives of today’s youth offenders: destructive relationships and loss of purpose.
- Brendtro et al. (1998) also argued that at-risk youths today often live with a “misery of unimportance” (p. 38) due to adults paying shrinking amount of attention to them.
- These authors concluded that specific assessment and treatment in these areas are crucial in helping troubled youths.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study was to identify risk factors associated with degrees of relational and purpose development in youth offenders. Key conclusions and recommendations based on the results are also included.

Methods: The adolescent residential treatment site used in this investigation is a 70-bed facility with an on-site school. Located in a rural Rocky Mountain state, the facility receives adolescents from court and Family services systems. Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial development

areas of intimacy and isolation (relational development) and ego integrity and despair (purpose development) were assessed during the first month of stay, along with risk factors of chemical dependency, risk to self and others, social functioning, family resources, and degree of structure needed in treatment.

Participants: Data in this study were collected from all adolescents who stayed at the residential treatment facility for at least 1 month during a 1-year period. The participants, ages 13 to 18, were court mandated for a variety of offenses ranging from running away to violent crime. Of the participants, 35% were female and 65% were male. The total sample of residents receiving initial psychosocial development testing over a 1-year period was 86 (30 girls, 56 boys). Of the sample, 90% were Caucasian, 5% were Hispanic, and 5% were African American. The average age was 14.7 years, with a range of 13 to 18 years.

Instruments Used: The Measure of Psychosocial Development (MPD) and the Youth comprehensive Risk Assessment (YCRA) were used in this study.

Key Results:

- For sense of purpose, 72% of the resident showed poor development in ego integrity and high despair (82%) compared with their norm group.
- Concerning relational development, most of the youth (64%) scored low in intimacy and high in isolation (60%).
- In a stepwise regression, higher substance abuse was significantly associated with lower ego integrity development.
- Higher risk to self was significantly associated with higher despair.
- Lower family resources were significantly associated with lower intimacy development.
- Lower family resources were also significantly associated with higher isolation, as was higher risk to self.

Key Conclusions/Recommendations: This investigation provides evidence for the *value of assessing relational and purpose development with youth offenders*. More intentional treatment of relational and purpose

development can reap benefits in reducing other risks, such as self-harm and substance abuse. The use of objective, reliable, and valid developmental assessment has also added consistency in addressing clinical needs at this treatment facility. Lyons et al., (1997) noted that this consistency was particularly important because many youth offender assessment procedures rely on ratings that are all too often influenced by subjective and idiosyncratic approaches. In addition, the results of this study are now being used for more effective training of caregivers, clinicians, teachers, families, and others to enhance their understanding of youths' individual needs and strengths.

- *Helpful interactions to increase intimacy development and reduce isolation* should focus on increasing family resources and reducing risk to self. Such interventions according to Ranieri (1984) include the following: not acting as a buddy; expressing concern while setting firm limits; helping in practical matters, such as school work, employment, and particularly socialization; and acknowledging and normalizing problems.
- *Other effective strategies* according to Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) include the following: encourage youth involvement in cooperative learning, and provide assertiveness training.
- For *increasing a sense of purpose and reducing despair*, therapeutic strategies should target treatment of substance abuse and depression/self-harm.
- *Other helpful treatment approaches* include life skills training, promotion of social engagement, increased family counseling, modeling positive staff-resident interactions, and a positive institutional atmosphere (Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998).