

A Child Welfare Agency Project: Therapy for Families of Status Offenders

KENNETH W. MICHAELS
ROBERT H. GREEN

*A pilot project providing therapy for families of
status-offender youths has proved
effective in reducing placements and costs.*

This paper reports on a pilot project at York, Pennsylvania, in which family therapy services were provided to Children's Services of York County, a child welfare agency, under a grant, to work with status-offender youths (i.e., incorrigibles, runaways and truants) and their families. The program was begun in 1975 and renewed in 1976 by the Pennsylvania Governor's Justice Commission. It had the dual goals of dealing effectively with problem behaviors and reducing state and county costs of placing the youths in foster homes, group homes and institutions.

Statistics from the Office of Criminal Justice of Pennsylvania, Division of Program Support, showed that in 1972, 1352 (35.4%) of all arrests in York County were of juveniles. Of these arrests, 296 were for status offenses. During that year there was a 57.9% increase in juvenile arrests in York County over 1971, as against a statewide increase of 22.2%. It was in light of these statistics that the York County agency instituted its program.

Kenneth W. Michaels, M.S. Ed., is Family Therapy Trainer/Consultant, Children's Services of York County. Robert H. Green, M.S. in Psychology, is Casework Supervisor II, Children's Services of York County, York, Pennsylvania. The project described in this paper was funded by Pennsylvania Law Enforcement Administration Grant #SC76/C16-B/338.

References

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2. _____, *Uncommon Therapy: The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson*, M.S. New York: W.W. Norton, 1973.
3. Minuchin, S. *Families and Family Therapy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974.
4. Montalvo, B. "Aspects of Live Supervision," *Family Process*, XII (1973).

A basic assumption of the program was that the focus for change for many of these youths was the family, since deviant behavior of a child often results from stress within the family, i.e., poverty, divorce or parental discord, or other crisis situations. The program is oriented toward assessing the family interaction and dealing with the immediate problem through family therapy, based on the procedures and theory described in the works of Haley [1: 2] and Minuchin [3].

At the first interview [1], a determination was made of the degree to which disruptive family relationship patterns were the source of the child's behavior. Intervention in further interviews was based on various family therapy techniques, with the goal of changing the disruptive patterns.

The training/supervision was oriented toward live supervision [4:343-359]. Use of a one-way mirror made it possible to switch strategies with a family at key moments during the therapy. Videotaping of interviews was a significant part of the therapy/supervision-training/planning conference process. Observing actual transactions gave the therapist/supervisor team information on which to develop messages and tasks designed to change relationships in the family.

Control Group

The program hoped to reduce by 40% the client status offenders processed through the juvenile courts, held at the detention home or placed in institutions, group homes or foster homes. The status offenders and their families who were served in the program were compared with a similar group of status offenders and their families who did not receive intervention services prior to the project. The families in both groups were referred by various sources such as the police, probation offices, schools, other agencies and parents and relatives.

The accompanying charts are based on indicators used to evaluate the impact of the program. Chart 1 deals with the 64 status offender cases seen without family therapy intervention from June 1973 through May 1975. It should be noted that placement cost figures are only as of May 1975, and would be greater if continued to the present. Chart 2 reflects the 75 cases accepted for family therapy services from May 1975 to June 1977. Where a youth had to be placed, the cost figures are up to the present. Inflation was not taken into consideration. Since the

CHART 1
Status Offender Families Processed Through the Agency Prior to Implementation of Family Therapy Services

June 1973-May 1975. n=64		
	Number	Percentage
Placement in institutions, foster care	28	44
Placement in detention homes	20	31
Processing through juvenile court	28	33
Costs for placements: \$131,725.14		

CHART 2
Status Offender Families Receiving Family Therapy Services

June 1973-May 1975 n=75		
	Number	Percentage
Placement in institutions, foster care	3	4
Placement in detention home	3	4
Processing through juvenile court	3	4
Costs for placements: \$23,172.13		

services provided by the project were budgeted at \$130,000, the savings were over \$78,000.

A "sequence of placement" indicator was developed during the program as a tracking device to highlight the difference between the ways of intervening with these youths. The placement of a particular youth is governed by many factors, including the uniqueness of the youth and the circumstances; the availability of placement resources; funding sources; the laws pertaining to treatment of youths who cause trouble; and the nature of the agencies having community mandates and sanctions to deal with these youths.

CHART 3
Random Selection of 20 Status Offender Cases Processed Through Agency Before Implementation of Family Therapy

June 1973-May 1975				
1. HF1	5. HFIFI	9. HFHFI	13. HFHFI	17. HI
2. HFDIII	6. HFIFI	10. HFHFI	14. HI	18. HIII
3. HFHDI	7. HI	11. HD1	15. HFIFI	19. HF1
4. HFHI	8. HF1	12. HI	16. HF1	20. HFHFI

CHART 4
Random Selection of 20 Status Offender Cases Processed Through Agency After Implementation of Family Therapy

June 1975-May 1977				
1. H	5. H	9. HDI	13. H	17. H
2. HDH	6. HDH	10. H	14. H	18. H
3. H	7. H	11. H	15. H	19. H
4. H	8. H	12. H	16. HF	20. H

The indicator tracks the movement from initial contact with the agency to placement in foster care, group homes, institutions and the county detention home. Effective family therapy apparently changed patterns of interaction within families and also between status-offender youths and the child welfare agency.

Charts 3 and 4 show the "sequence of placement" before and after the formal introduction of family therapy services at the agency. The chart coding is: H—child with family or guardian; D—detention home; F—foster home; and I—institutions, group homes.

Conclusions

Child welfare workers can be trained to shift their role toward changing disruptive relationship patterns within families of status-offender youths. A reduction in costs for care of such young people can be achieved by intervention for change in families. Therapeutic intervention with the family appears effective in avoiding placement of the youth outside his own home. ☆