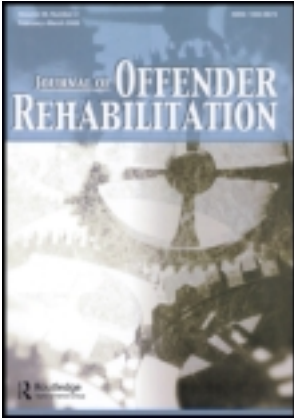


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Towards a Strength-Based Juvenile Correctional Facility: Sustainability and Effects of an Institutional Transformation

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In 2006, the administration of a state-run, secure juvenile correctional facility initiated an attempt to transform its institutional culture using a strength-based approach to assessment and case planning. This resulted in a rapid improvement in institutional climate. The current study revisits this setting several years later to see if those improvements were sustained, if they have produced better outcomes for youth, and if the assessment and case planning practices demonstrate fidelity to the intended approach. Results suggest that the institutional climate remains greatly improved and that recidivism results are encouraging, but that implementation of the practice model could be strengthened.

KEYWORDS *correctional treatment, delinquents, juvenile justice, prison culture, recidivism, strength-based assessment*

In 2006, the Johnson Youth Center, a facility operated by the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice in Juneau (ADJJ), embarked upon an ambitious attempt to transform the culture of its secure Treatment Unit (JYCTU) into one built upon a strength-based approach to assessment and case planning (Mackin, Weller,

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Tarte, & Nissen, 2005; Nissen, Mackin, Weller, & Tarte, 2005). Following an initial round of staff training, a preliminary evaluation documented measurable improvements in institutional climate as perceived by both staff and youth residents, as well as marked reductions in incidents on the unit such as assaults and complaints (Barton, Mackin, & Fields, 2008). Now, several years later and following additional rounds of training, one may ask whether or not the short-term gains have been sustained and whether or not they have led to better outcomes for the youth. The present report addresses these questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last several decades, research has consistently documented that between 50% and 80% of the youth are rearrested within 1 to 3 years of release (Howell, 2003; Minor, Wells, & Angel, 2008; Trulson, Marquart, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005). There is even evidence that institutions may be somewhat criminogenic, with success inversely related to length of confinement (Loughran et al., 2009). Moreover, conditions of confinement in many of these institutions are deplorable, with reports of overcrowding and abuse being common (Abrams, 2005; Beck, Harrison, & Guerino, 2010; Cannon, 2004; Lerner, 1986; Livesy, Sickmund, & Sladky, 2009; Parent et al., 1994). As with other aspects of juvenile justice, juvenile correctional institutions struggle with the tension between emphases on punishment (sometimes euphemistically called "accountability") and treatment (Bernard & Kurlychek, 2010). With either emphasis, the culture of most juvenile correctional facilities is control oriented. As such, the culture is dominated by power relationships.

While acknowledging that protecting the public and addressing the risks and needs posed by young offenders are both legitimate goals, some argue that juvenile justice settings may find greater success by incorporating a positive youth development (PYD) framework, since, after all, young offenders are children and adolescents with the same developmental needs that other young people have (Barton, 2004; Barton & Butts, 2008; J. A. Butts, Bazemore, & Meroe, 2010; J. Butts, Mayer, & Ruth, 2005; Frabutt, DiLuca, & Graves, 2008; Schwartz, 2001; Scott & Steinberg, 2008). Although several models of positive youth development exist (e.g., Benson & Pittman, 2001; Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2001; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Pittman & Irby, 1996; Scales & Leffert, 1999), each recognizes that all children and adolescents need appropriate supports and opportunities to maximize their potential for positive life outcomes. Young offenders are no exception. Beyond meeting essential needs such as safety, food, shelter, and clothing, such supports and opportunities include relationships with caring adults, conveying a sense of personal worth and dignity, and promoting the development and enhancement of strengths and interests. Such assets are not only intrinsically valuable, but they act as buffers to risks such as those that lead to offending behavior.

The literature describes settings conducive to positive youth development as characterized by three main elements: (a) goals that include promoting competency building and positive connections with adults, peers, and community institutions; (b) a supportive and empowering environment that includes high expectations for positive behavior; and (c) activities that include opportunities to build skills, real and challenging experiences, and exposure to new social and cultural influences (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Most juvenile correctional institutions are not settings conducive to positive youth development. In most juvenile justice settings, the education and skill training opportunities are limited, the environment is typically control-oriented rather than supportive and empowering, activities are highly circumscribed, staff turnover is high, and youth receive nearly identical case plans and interventions (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006).

There are juvenile justice settings, however, that make a conscious effort to transform their culture into one more hospitable to PYD (see Barton & Butts, 2008, for several examples). Practitioners operating from a PYD framework typically employ aspects of the strengths perspective (Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 2006), a paradigm that stands in sharp contrast to the deficit based, medical model that characterizes many treatment service settings. Those practicing from a strengths perspective acknowledge that every individual has strengths, use the assessment process to discover those strengths, and collaborate with clients to develop intervention plans that build upon such strengths (Saleebey, 2006). Strength-based practitioners recognize that people are more likely to change when they are fully engaged as partners participating in setting goals and selecting intervention strategies rather than when they are the objects of change efforts initiated by others. Juvenile justice programs that attempt to introduce strength-based practice find that such a transformation does not occur quickly or easily, but must be nurtured and sustained through a combination of committed leadership, collaboration with individuals and agencies outside of the juvenile justice professional community, and policies and practices that support strength-based approaches to assessment and intervention (Barton & Butts, 2008).

BACKGROUND

The JYCTU, one of four residential treatment facilities operated by the ADJJ, is one juvenile correctional institution that has made such an attempt to transform its institutional culture. Part of a larger complex that also includes a detention unit, the JYCTU is a small, 22-bed, secure facility for males ages 15–18 who have been adjudicated for moderate to serious offenses. As documented by Barton et al. (2008), from its inception in 1999 to 2005, the JYCTU culture had evolved into one that was predominately punitive. Staff and youth alike perceived a tense climate with frequent

incidents of conflict. Staff set treatment goals with little input from the youth or their families, and these goals did not vary much from individual to individual. The staff during those years did not include a mental health professional, and few residents received mental health treatment services from contracted therapists. Many youth in juvenile correctional facilities have mental health issues; for example, in 2010, every youth at the JYCTU had at least one DSM-IV Axis 1 diagnosis (State of Alaska, Division of Juvenile Justice, 2011a).

In 2005, the ADJJ hired a new superintendent for JYC and arranged for a consultant to visit the JYCTU to assess its operations and make recommendations. This consultant produced two reports (Heafner, 2006a, 2006b) that laid the groundwork for a comprehensive transformation of the culture of the JYCTU to a strength-based environment. Specific recommendations included adopting a strength-based assessment protocol, developing individualized case plans, and expanding linkages to the community. The new superintendent readily embraced the challenge with support from the ADJJ administration.

According to the logic of the institutional transformation strategy, JYCTU would train staff in strength-based assessment and case planning, and would revise unit policies and procedures to be compatible with the strength-based approach. In the short-term, these efforts should lead to improved staff-resident relationships and institutional climate on the unit, which, in turn, should lead to a reduction in the frequency of problem incidents on the unit. As a result of the training and subsequent implementation of individualized assessments that incorporate strengths, case plans should specify interventions tailored more effectively to each resident. Ultimately, more effective case plans and a better institutional climate should result in more effective interventions and these, in turn, should produce better long-term case outcomes (including, but not limited to, lower recidivism).

In September 2006, the division contracted with NPC Research to provide training to JYCTU staff in the use of the Youth Competency Assessment (YCA), a strength-based tool developed by NPC Research specifically for use in juvenile justice settings (Mackin et al., 2005; Nissen et al., 2005). In addition, the superintendent extensively revised the facility's policies and procedures manual to align it with the strength-based approach (for details of these revisions, see Barton et al., 2008). As a result, the number of incidents on or related to the unit (such as assaults, verbal outbursts, complaints from youth or family members) plummeted from an average of 6.7 per month prior to the initial YCA training to only 1.5 per month in the first 6 months after the training (Barton et al., 2008). The JYCTU also instituted regular measurement of the institutional climate, administering the Correctional Institutions Environment Scale (CIES; Moos, 1974, 1987) to both staff and residents beginning with a baseline in the fall 2006, prior to the first YCA training. The CIES, normed on large samples of both youth and

adults in correctional institutions, assesses climate on nine subscales encompassing three dimensions (relational, personal growth, and system maintenance).

The CIES was again administered in March and September 2007, and later in 2010. A comparison of baseline scores to the 2007 follow-ups documented significant improvements in climate as perceived by both staff and residents on most of the dimensions. Not everything fell into place perfectly, however. Some staff did not adapt smoothly to the changes introduced from leadership, and turnover was extensive. Such turnover is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity to recruit new staff who are more aligned with the strength-based approach, although such recruitment is limited by the available labor pool, according to the superintendent. On the other hand, the addition of many new staff requires additional training, and NPC Research has provided follow-up trainings regularly in recent years.

Thus, the changes introduced at the JYCTU in 2006 made palpable and immediate improvements in the culture and operations of the facility. It remained to be seen at the time whether or not these improvements would persist over time and would extend to better long-term outcomes for the youth. The present study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. Have the initial reductions in incident reports and improvements in institutional climate been sustained?
2. Are the changes in institutional climate associated with improvements in the recidivism outcomes of JYCTU youth?
3. To what extent do the JYCTU's assessments, case plans, and interventions now reflect a more strength-based, PYD-focused approach?

The JYC superintendent reported a number of recent changes that had affected or could affect the facility. For the last few years, he has served not only as the superintendent of the JYC but also of the ADJJ facility in Ketchikan, so his time is split between the two locations. 2010 saw turnover among the top administrators in the ADJJ; support for further expansion of the strength-based efforts is unknown. In 2009, revised ADJJ policies introduced a structured transition/step-down phase to institutional programming. Ironically, JYC had introduced a targeted reentry program in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club (BGC) in 2007, which would have been a potentially ideal partner for the transition/step-down phase, but the BGC collaboration ended in fall 2009. The JYCTU does have a range of community partners, some of whom come into the facility. These include volunteers who provide Alcoholics Anonymous groups, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and culinary arts programming with support from the Workplace Investment Act.

METHODS

To address Research Questions 1 and 2 above, the ADJJ and JYCTU provided the results of the 2006, 2007, and 2010 CIES administrations for the JYCTU, summaries of incident reports, and recidivism statistics for JYCTU and the state from FY 2006 through FY 2010. To address Question 3, JYCTU provided one of the authors (Barton) with copies of a sample of seven randomly selected case files of youth at the facility as of September 2010, redacting any identifying information. The CIES results and reported frequency of incidents address the question of sustainability of the initial improvements in institutional climate. A comparison of JYCTU residents' post-release recidivism rates with those of youth released from other ADJJ treatment facilities provides an indication of the longer-term effects on case outcomes. The depth and quality of individual case plans indicate the extent to which strength-based practices permeate staff practice.

MEASURES

Institutional Climate

The CIES (Moos, 1987) contains nine subscales covering three dimensions of institutional climate, defined as follows:

RELATIONAL DIMENSION

- Involvement—how active residents are in the day-to-day functioning of the program.
- Support—the extent to which residents are encouraged to help and support other residents; how supportive the staff is toward residents.
- Expressiveness—how much the program encourages the open expression of feelings by residents and staff.

PERSONAL GROWTH DIMENSION

- Autonomy—the extent to which residents are encouraged to take initiative in planning activities and to take leadership in the unit.
- Practical orientation—the degree to which residents learn practical skills and are prepared for release from the program.
- Personal problem orientation—the extent to which residents are encouraged to understand their personal problems and feelings.

SYSTEM MAINTENANCE DIMENSION

- Order and organization—how important order and organization are in the program.

- Clarity—the extent to which residents know what to expect in the day-to-day routine of the program and the explicitness of rules and procedures.
- Staff control—the degree to which staff uses measures to keep residents under necessary controls (Moos, 1987).

Each scale has either 9 or 10 true or false items, with item wording varied so that some true responses and some false responses reflect positive perceptions of the climate dimension. For scoring purposes, each response reflecting a positive perception is counted. Scores on each of the scales can range from 0 to either 9 or 10, with higher scores reflecting more positive climate aspects.

Recidivism

The ADJJ tracks recidivism of all youth assigned to their residential programs for a 1-year period following their release from the facilities and defines recidivism as adjudication on a new offense, probation violation, or violation of conditions of conduct within 1 year of release. Status offenses are not included.

Implementation of Strength-Based, PYD Practices

A review of case records is one way to assess the extent to which the JYCTU has implemented a strength-based, PYD approach. Case records should include copies of assessment instruments, social history information, case plans, and documentation of services provided. From these, one can ascertain whether and how thoroughly the YCA and other assessments are being used, if findings from these assessments inform the case plans, if goals and treatment strategies are individualized, and if the plans involve linkages to other services in the community or to informal sources of support.

The case files were reviewed with a checklist (available from the first author upon request). The checklist included items such as the presence or absence of completed assessments (the Youth Level of Services/Case Management Inventory [YLS/CMI; Hoge & Andrews, 1996] and the YCA), a listing of specific risks, needs and strengths from the assessments, the extent to which the case plan appeared to be individualized, and the extent of contribution of the YLS/CMI and YCA to the case plan, treatment goals listed, and other items related to the contents of the case plan.

RESULTS

Sustainability of Institutional Climate Improvements

The frequency of incidents, such as assaults, verbal outbursts, the presence of contraband on the unit, and complaints can serve as one measure of

institutional climate. Table 1 shows the number and types of incidents reported during four time periods: the 9.5 months prior to the initial YCA training, the 6.5 months immediately following that training, and, as a follow-up, 2009 and the first 10 months of 2010. The number of reported incidents divided by the number of months in a period produces the measure of incident frequency.

It is clear that the frequency of incidents (see the bottom row of the table) dropped sharply following the initial YCA training, and has remained low in 2009 and 2010 at less than one third the pretraining level. In particular, the complaints lodged by the families of residents, common prior to the training, seem to have been eliminated. Discovering contraband in the unit and residents threatening staff are now extremely rare. On the other hand, verbal outbursts directed towards staff, resident self-harm behaviors, and staff use of physical restraint, which had declined immediately after the training, appear to have increased recently. There is no evidence that the type of youth assigned to the JYCTU has changed much over the recent years,

TABLE 1 Critical Incidents at the JYCTU Pre- and Post-YCA Training

Type of incident	Pre-YCA	Post-YCA	Follow-up	
	1/1/06– 9/19/06	9/20/06– 3/31/07	2009	2010
Resident on resident assault	4	1	1	1
Resident verbal outburst directed towards staff or failure to follow staff instructions	12	3	7	9
Resident verbal threats of physical harm against staff	5	0	0	0
Resident physical restraint (involving two or more staff)	3	1	1	5
Resident self harm behaviors (hitting/kicking walls and doors, self-mutilation, suicide gestures)	4	1	3	4
Resident alcohol or drug use while on pass from the facility	2	1	0	0
Resident escape planning	1	0	1	0
Contraband on unit (any items not approved for residents in the treatment program manual)	9	1	1	0
Telephonic complaints received by the superintendent regarding staff and/or services from residents' family members	14	0	0	0
Written complaints to the ADJJ state offices	2	0	0	0
Resident escape from facility	0	0	1	0
Resident escapes from pass	1	2	2	0
Total	57	10	17	19
Number of months in period	9.5	6.5	12	10
Incidents per month	6.7	1.5	1.4	1.9

Note. ADJJ = Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice; 2010 data through October only.

although a steady and gradual decline in its average daily population from 18.8 in 2002 to 11.6 in 2010 (State of Alaska, Division of Juvenile Justice, 2011b) may have contributed to the reduction in incidents.

Tables 2 and 3 present, for residents and staff, respectively, the CIES results for three points in time: pre-YCA training (September 2006); 1 year post-YCA training (September 2007), and a recent follow-up in 2010. Since most youth and staff were different at each administration, they were treated as independent samples for the purposes of significance testing. Larger mean scores reflect more "positive" perceived climate. As noted previously, both staff and residents perceived rapid and substantial improvement in the institutional climate of the JYCTU, as measured by the CIES, following the initial YCA training in 2006. It is clear that the immediate improvements have been sustained on nearly all of the CIES dimensions. The results from 2010 are highly similar to those found in 2007. The few differences are discussed next.

The 2007 means for residents were significantly higher than the baseline on all dimensions except Expressiveness and Autonomy (see Table 2). The 2010 resident means remained significantly higher than baseline on all dimensions except expressiveness, autonomy, and personal problem orientation. The most dramatic improvements were reported on dimensions such as support, practical orientation, order and organization, and clarity. These make sense from a strength-based perspective.

Staff scores (see Table 3) exhibit a similar consistency, with significant improvements (compared to the 2006 baseline) in both 2007 and 2010 on all dimensions except personal problem orientation and staff control. It is clear

TABLE 2 Social Climate Pre- and Post-YCA: Residents

CIES dimension	Pre-YCA (9/06) <i>N</i> = 17		Post-YCA (9/07) <i>N</i> = 13		Follow-up (4/10) <i>N</i> = 13	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Involvement ^a	2.88	1.87	4.46	2.10	5.15	2.18
Support ^a	4.12	2.19	6.69	2.27	7.46	2.21
Expressiveness	2.82	1.89	4.00	1.88	3.77	1.37
Autonomy	3.82	1.72	4.38	1.82	4.00	1.41
Practical orientation ^a	5.82	2.12	7.15	1.46	7.46	1.45
Personal problem orientation ^b	2.82	1.76	4.62	1.15	4.00	1.75
Order and organization ^a	5.00	2.06	7.23	1.80	6.85	1.99
Clarity ^a	4.35	2.08	6.31	1.73	6.46	1.60
Staff control ^a	5.94	1.47	7.54	1.01	7.46	0.75

Note. CIES = Correctional Institutions Environment Scale.

^aPre-YCA mean significantly different from both post-YCA and follow-up means. ^bPre-YCA mean significantly different from post-YCA mean only.

TABLE 3 Social Climate Pre- and Post-YCA: Staff

CIES dimension	Pre-YCA (9/06) N = 9		Post-YCA (9/07) N = 8		Follow-up (4/10) N = 21	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Involvement ^a	4.22	2.66	6.88	2.66	7.71	1.81
Support ^a	7.00	2.21	9.13	0.93	9.24	0.84
Expressiveness ^a	3.00	1.83	4.75	1.32	4.52	1.23
Autonomy ^a	4.11	1.73	6.75	0.94	5.53	1.74
Practical orientation ^a	7.33	2.21	9.25	0.85	8.81	1.23
Personal problem orientation	5.00	2.54	5.75	1.83	4.10	1.27
Order and organization ^a	5.56	2.45	7.75	1.09	8.95	1.36
Clarity ^a	5.44	1.83	8.00	1.88	8.05	1.24
Staff control ^b	5.44	1.42	4.62	1.20	6.29	1.20

Note. CIES = Correctional Institutions Environment Scale.

^aPre-YCA mean significantly different from both post-YCA and follow-up means. ^bPost-YCA mean significantly different from follow-up mean only.

that resident and staff scores exhibit nearly identical patterns of improvement on all dimensions except staff control (residents rated this higher than did staff at all time points). Interestingly, although staff's control scores were somewhat lower in 2007 than in 2006, their 2010 scores were significantly higher than the 2007 scores.

Recidivism Outcomes

In addition to improvements in institutional climate, stakeholders hoped that introducing the strength-based policies and practices to the JYCTU would result in more successful outcomes for the youths, including reductions in recidivism. Table 4 compares the recidivism statistics of those released from the JYCTU with those released from all the division's other residential treatment facilities for FY 2006 through FY 2010. Note that the data shown for a given fiscal year

TABLE 4 Recidivism Comparison: JYCTU Versus All Other ADJJ Treatment Facilities

Treatment facility	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10
JYCTU					
No. released	18	10	17	21	11
Recidivism %	44.4	30.0	47.1	38.1	18.2
Other ADJJ facilities					
No. released	126	93	96	92	94
Recidivism %	25.4	34.4	39.6	46.7	42.6

Source: Derived from ADJJ Performance Measure for Recidivism—FY2010, 8/28/2010.

Note. JYCTU = Johnson Youth Center Treatment Unit; ADJJ = Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice. Data based on youth released two fiscal years prior (e.g., FY2010 data from youth released in FY2008). Recidivism defined as: adjudications on new offenses, probation violations, or violations of conduct conditions within 1 year of release.

are based on youth released 2 years previously to allow for the postrelease follow-up time so that, for example, the FY10 data refer to recidivism of youth released in 2008.

Only youths released in 2007 and later, reflected in the FY 2009 and FY 2010 recidivism data, would have experienced the changed institutional climate. The JYCTU recidivism rates for FY 2006 through FY 2008 are above or near the levels of all the division's other treatment facilities combined. However, by FY 2009 and, especially, FY 2010, the JYCTU rates are considerably lower. Although the FY2010 recidivism comparison between youth released from JYCTU and the other treatment centers in FY2008 looks substantial, the difference does not reach conventional criteria for statistical significance (Fishers Exact Test, $p=.193$) as a result of the small sample size for JYCTU.

Extent of Implementation of the Strength-Based, PYD Approach

Each of the case files reviewed included information from the YCA (in one form or another), the YLS/CMI, social history, case plan, and comments concerning the early adjustment of each youth to the facility. A checklist, as described previously in the Measures section, structured the review of these files, enabling the extraction of details from the assessments and case plans. While case files are rich sources of information about a program, they are not without limitations. Not everything that happens is recorded in the files, and the level of recorded detail may vary from case to case. Therefore, the following description and analysis based on these few files may be an incomplete representation of how the JYCTU actually functions.

The seven youth ranged in age from 15 to 17. Four were Caucasian, two were Alaska Native, and the race/ethnicity of one was not apparent in the file as provided. Two had been committed to the JYCTU for serious offenses against persons, four for serious property offenses, and one for multiple drug offenses. Most had a record of prior offenses and had been on probation previously; some had experienced multiple periods of incarceration in other detention or treatment facilities.

All of the case files contained a summary of the YLS/CMI assessment, and most included details from the full YLS/CMI interview. On this instrument, the interviewer scores the youth as representing a low, moderate, or high risk on each of eight dimensions, and subscores are totaled to reflect an overall level of risk. The interviewer can also note if any of the dimensions appear to be areas of strength for the youth. Among the seven youth, the mean total score was 11.3, reflecting a moderate level of risk. The individual total scores indicated one at low risk (0–8), four at moderate risk (9–22), two at high risk (23–34), and none at very high risk (above 34). Table 5 shows the level of risk indicated for the youths on each dimension and the number of times a dimension was cited as an area of strength.

TABLE 5 YLS/CMI Summary From JYCTU Sample Record Review

YLS/CMI dimension	Strength	Risk level		
		Low	Mod.	High
Offenses/Dispositions	0	4	0	3
Family/Parenting	1	3	3	1
Education/Employment	3	3	2	2
Peer relations	2	2	3	2
Substance abuse	0	1	5	1
Leisure/Recreation	3	3	0	4
Personality/Behavior	2	3	3	1
Attitudes/Orientation	1	2	4	1

Note. YLS/CMI = Youth Level of Services/Case Management Inventory; JYCTU = Johnson Youth Center Treatment Unit.

From Table 5, it is clear that the seven cases presented varying constellations of risks and strengths on these dimensions. The majority received moderate risk scores on substance abuse and attitudes/orientation, while several received scores of high risk on leisure/recreation. The areas most commonly designated as strengths were education/employment and leisure/recreation.

All seven case files contained a version of the YCA strength assessment: five used the long version, one used the notes version, and one the short version. The long version clearly elicited the most detailed information (although one of these seemed quite superficial), while the others provided much less. Some files contained specific strength and interest information based on the YLS/CMI or the social history as well. All identified at least some skills and interests that could be relevant for case planning. Among these interests or skills were: playing or learning a musical instrument (two cases); working on cars, trucks, snowmobiles, or boats (three cases); welding (two cases); hunting and fishing (four cases); athletics (four cases); academic areas (three cases); and home repairs, landscaping, and culinary activities (one case each). Some mentioned specific goals, including educational goals (completing high school, obtaining a GED, going to college) and occupational goals (e.g., starting a business, welding, becoming a master tradesman). All identified one or more persons, usually family members, but also specific friends and other adults (one mentioned a former boss), as people they respected and who could help them achieve their goals.

Most of the case plans incorporated at least some content from the YLS/CMI assessments, while almost none showed a direct link to content from the YCA. Every case plan identified most of a common set of treatment goals (working on substance abuse issues; addressing anger issues, impulsivity, thinking errors, or emotional issues; taking responsibility for past and present actions; developing respect for others and victim empathy; working on school credits). These can be found in the case plans from almost all juvenile

correctional facilities. Only two of the plans had readily identifiable individualized elements (one mentioned preparing the youth for Coast Guard eligibility; another mentioned teaching the youth to manage his medical condition). Not surprisingly, then, the intervention strategies in every plan specified participating in the facility's core programs: Aggression Replacement Training, Chemical Dependency Group, Acceptance Commitment Dialectic Group, the JYC school program, and the step-wise level system that rewards and sanctions behavior during the day.

Conspicuous by their absence were any mentions of activities implied by the youths' interests and goals, or linkages to any resources beyond the facility. Consider the information gleaned from the various assessments of just these seven youth. Might the plans have included partnering with businesses or organizations in the community (e.g., small engine shops, culinary services, fish and game clubs or businesses, athletic facilities, music lessons, and so on)? Even if every youth cannot leave the facility at all phases of their time in residence, individuals and organizations from the outside can be brought in for demonstrations, skill coaching, or tutoring. Youths who wish to start businesses can acquire basic knowledge of such topics as finances and marketing.

The reports of the pre-YCA conditions at the JYCTU (Heafner, 2006a, 2006b) referenced a lack of reentry planning and recommended the development of solid aftercare programming. Subsequently, the facility partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to provide a targeted reentry program, although that apparently ended in 2009. With this history, and with the onset of the recent transition/step-down policy, one would expect some continuing attention to aftercare planning. Admittedly, aftercare in Alaska can be geographically challenging. However, content in the Aftercare Plan section of the files was vague and generic, such as "[the youth] will work closely with [aftercare probation officer] to return to his home in [location]." In one of the files, this section did mention the new transition, step-down phase, but provided no further details.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The JYCTU is a trendsetter among secure juvenile correctional facilities in its adoption of a model of strength-based assessment and intervention. As the literature makes clear, accomplishing a transformation of a juvenile correctional culture is neither quick nor easy. After 5 years, the JYCTU appears to have made sustained improvements in its institutional climate as perceived by both staff and youth. The reductions in problem incidents on the unit, for the most part, have also been maintained.

The results of this study provide the first evidence that the transformation of the climate at the JYCTU may have an enduring positive impact on the

youth, although interpretive caution is warranted for several reasons. First, the trainings in strength-based assessment and case planning along with changes in policies and procedures do appear to have produced sustained, positive changes in the institutional climate, but the case file reviews show limited implementation of the strength-based approach to case planning, so any positive outcomes may be linked more to the changes in climate than to the nature of the practice model. Future research might examine a larger cohort of cases, and compare outcomes of youth whose case plans reflected the strength-based approach with those whose case plans did not. Second, the difference in recent recidivism rates between the JYCTU and other treatment facilities does not reach conventional criteria of statistical significance because of the small sample size. Should this magnitude of difference persist for another year, however, the combined 2-year difference would be statistically significant. Third, the design does not permit a strong conclusion regarding a causal link between the institutional climate and recidivism. Other caveats include limited generalizability due to the single setting, small size of the institution, and the small numbers of youth. Since one of the authors (Mackin) was responsible for the trainings in strength-based assessment and case planning, there is an inevitable possibility of bias, although it should be noted that the other author (Barton) conducted the case reviews, and those reviews do not suggest strong implementation of the strength-based approach to case planning.

Despite these limitations, the trends suggested by these results are encouraging. Most impressive, perhaps, are the apparent reductions in recidivism among youth who experienced the new approach compared to the recidivism of earlier cohorts, although this outcome cannot be attributed with confidence to the introduction of the strength-based approach. The leadership and staff of the JYCTU deserve a great deal of credit for their sustained dedication to the practice and policy changes and for their willingness to continue tracking their outcomes with data.

That said, there is still considerable room for improvement in the details of conducting strength-based assessments and case planning as well as in the delivery of more comprehensive reentry programming. Despite the frequent booster trainings provided by NPC Research, the staff does not appear to be using the YCA to its fullest potential as a means to derive in-depth, individualized information about youth's strengths and goals. Moreover, the treatment plans reviewed made little if any use of information from the YCA, and, as a result, were relatively uniform and similar to those found in many juvenile correctional institutions. There was little evidence of engaging youth, families, or community agencies as partners in individualized plans, either for interventions during the youths' stays in the facility or for reentry. It is possible that more attention to these details could produce even greater short-term and long-term successes for the JYCTU and its residents.

The results of this study, while not consistently positive, are encouraging for those who support the reorientation of juvenile justice into a system

that promotes strength-based, positive youth development. The progress made by the JYCTU in a few short years is particularly impressive in that it has taken place in a secure juvenile correctional facility. The following recommendations are offered as an attempt to support such a transformation, both at the JYCTU and in other settings:

- Use data to track short-term and long-term outcomes, as the ADJJ and JYCTU have done. Employ repeated administrations of the CIES or some other validated measure, prior to and following system intervention, to monitor institutional climate. Record incidents on the unit as another climate monitoring measure. Systematically collect and review recidivism data for at least 12 months postrelease, and preferably longer. Since some youths may age out of the juvenile system during the follow-up period, create collaborations with adult corrections to be able to track recidivism through adult criminal justice records where necessary.
- Training in strength-based assessment and case planning is not a one-time endeavor. Contract with NPC Research or some other resource to provide periodic “booster” trainings in the use of the YCA or other assessment tools in case planning.
- In addition to the conventional array of treatment groups in secure juvenile institutions, introduce more activities tied to youths’ strengths, interests, and longer-term prosocial goals. Draw upon any parallel interests or skills of staff, and/or make connections with individuals and organizations in the community who can bring these resources into the facility.
- Consider adopting the positive youth justice framework proposed by J. A. Butts et al. (2010) to guide the development of intervention activities. This framework consists of:

12 key components depicted as a 2 by 6 matrix. Each cell in the matrix represents the interaction of two key assets needed by all youth: (1) learning/doing, and (2) attaching/belonging. Each asset should be developed within the context of six separate life domains (work, education, relationships, community, health, and creativity). (J. A. Butts et al., p. 7)

- Closely monitor the fidelity of implementation of the strength-based, PYD approach. Conduct periodic, systematic reviews of case files to monitor the quality and depth of assessments and case plans. Introduce a written checklist that includes details of the strength-based practice expectations to be used by supervisors in reviewing staff’s assessment and case planning.
- Strengthen reentry planning by formally adopting the intensive after-care program approach (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2004). This includes developing or strengthening partnerships with probation and community agencies, and incorporating reentry planning into the initial planning process when youth arrive at a facility.

Implementation of a strength-based approach clearly has had a positive impact on the JYCTU and adoption of these recommendations has the potential to further improve youth outcomes. The results found at JYCTU provide support for the benefit that can be experienced by other juvenile justice facilities willing to take on this type of change process.

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