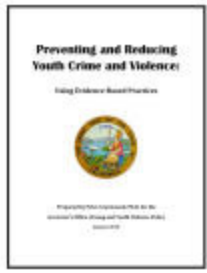


Keeping kids out of trouble not easy

State czar IDs programs that do, don't work

By JULIA REYNOLDS
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There's as much science as art to keeping kids out of trouble.

So believe a throng of researchers and California's gang czar Paul Seave, the Schwarzenegger appointee who heads the governor's Office of Gang and Youth Violence Policy.

Related: [Ceasefire missing from state's rating list](#)

Last year, Seave hired an expert to "clear away the brush" and rate the results from 63 of the most popular methods used across the nation — and in Monterey County — to try to steer youths from gangs, drugs and jail.

"We issued the report because there are so many

'evidence based' practices out there, but most don't really have the scientific support," Seave said. "We need to think about this as an investment. We have enough knowledge not to have to put money in programs based on anecdotal evidence."

More than a few sacred cows were slaughtered in the final report, which was sent to state officials Wednesday.

Among the methods that studies found just don't work to keep youths from committing crimes: long-revered programs such as DARE — Drug Abuse Resistance and Education — and standard tough-love strategies such as "boot camps" and "scared straight" interventions, some of which end with even more kids back in jail.

"People have a hard time accepting that their cherished beliefs don't hold up," said the report's author Peter Greenwood, who heads a national organization called the Association for Advancement of Evidence Based Practice.

In a state where more than \$2billion is spent annually on youth violence prevention efforts, Seave said he hopes the report will help county probation departments and schools clarify how best to spend their money.

Look at list

Greenwood, who has spent a lifetime analyzing juvenile justice and violence prevention for the Rand Corporation and a slew of universities, said he wanted to make a list of approaches to youth crime that are truly "evidence-based" — a term often thrown around loosely by groups hoping to show that their favorite method works.

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His purpose, he said, was to "sift through what's out there" in a nation that seems to constantly offer up studies claiming to prove just about anything. He's part of a growing movement in youth violence prevention circles that's looking for results backed up by rigorous scientific research, not the kinds of reports that Greenwood calls "political lists" of favorite programs.

"There's a lot of noise out there. The American public doesn't have a strong science background and people don't always have the skills to know when someone's pulling their leg," Greenwood said.

His report looks mainly at efforts developed for teens 18 and younger, and measures success based on recidivism rates — the percentage of participants who go on to commit new crimes.

What works

Among those approaches Greenwood calls "proven" to work are Big Brothers-Big Sisters mentoring, middle school Life Skills Training, a program called Functional Family Therapy, cognitive therapy and group counseling.

Also shown to keep kids from crime was something as seemingly simple as graduating from high school, a finding that echoes the conclusion of a report released last month by two Naval Postgraduate School researchers who looked at factors influencing crime rates in Salinas.

For the state report, Greenwood didn't undertake his own investigation of the various methods, but relied on evaluations already done by four organizations whose work he considers scientifically rigorous and trustworthy.

Then he divided the methods into two categories: "brand-name programs," which call for fairly rigid steps and often follow written manuals; and "strategies," which are flexible, general approaches such as mentoring, improving high school dropout rates or providing job placement and training,

Make things worse

In the end, he came up with a list of 36 programs and strategies that are proven to work, 16 that look promising, and 11 that, well, just don't cut it.

A couple of strategies flat-out seemed to make things worse, including the "scared straight" approach of having ex-convicts tell first-time offenders about the consequences of outlaw life, which the report said increased criminal recidivism by more than 6 percent.

Seave said researchers who have studied the strategy have come to understand that hearing ex-cons talk tough can actually attract certain at-risk youths to the criminal life.

Or as a middle-school teacher once put it, "It may seem cool to be an ex-gang member, but there's only one way to become an ex-gang member. First you have to join a gang."

Other strategies, such as military-style boot camps — which Attorney General Jerry Brown vigorously promoted when he was mayor of Oakland — were rated as ineffective in steering youths away from crime.

The school-based anti-drug program DARE was also found to be ineffective, according to the report. Gang czar Seave says DARE has received generous federal funding over the years and is popular with

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law enforcement officers who, "to their credit, want to get involved in the prevention and intervention side" of crime. But the research on DARE has found that the program shows "no significant impact on use of alcohol, tobacco or illicit drugs."

One strategy conspicuously absent from the list is Ceasefire, an initiative championed by Seave and now underway in Salinas.

Seave stressed that methods rated "promising" still meet a "very high standard," and are worthy of consideration when communities try to prioritize their spending.

Being cautious

Greenwood cautions that his list is not a prescription for any one community to follow. He recommends a "portfolio approach" when selecting programs and strategies.

How a method is put into practice, he said, greatly affects its success rate: a program with a low rating done well can sometimes work much better than a four-star program done badly.

And what does Greenwood mean by "done well?" Sticking to the plan, providing enough treatments and keeping track of results.

"Dosage matters," he writes. "Too few sessions (with youth) can be ineffective."

He emphasized that communities' efforts should target those teens most at risk of getting and staying involved in the criminal life — a notion that may anger those who believe that paying extra attention to criminal youths is tantamount to rewarding bad behavior.

But with those kids most at risk, Greenwood writes, "there is more room for improvement," and, he cautions, "higher costs of failure."

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