**Juvenile Justice Reform Policy**

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**Introduction**

Juvenile justice reform policies have been implemented in many countries to address the social problems related to juvenile offending and reduce crime rates (Bazemore, & Schiff, 2013). The policies aim to promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of juvenile offenders into society, rather than punishing them for their offenses. These policies recognize that youth offenders are often influenced by a variety of factors, such as poverty, lack of education, and mental health problems, and therefore require specialized interventions to address these underlying issues (Bazemore, & Schiff, 2013).

**Historical Context of the Policy**

Many countries have placed initiatives to deal with problems associated with juvenile criminal activities. In 1974 the United States of America established the Juvenile Justice and delinquency prevention act that aimed to establish a juvenile justice system that was fair and more efficient (Bazemore, & Schiff, 2013). Additionally, the act's purpose was meant to prevent juveniles from being imprisoned in adult facilities and also to be able to provide treatment and rehabilitation choices for them. Despite its many achievements the act has also received some criticisms over the years and has been termed as ineffective for not addressing the underlying issues of the system.

**Problem**

The problem of juvenile delinquency is complex and is associated with various root causes. The juvenile justice reform policy addresses the issue of juvenile delinquency. Based on the research conducted by Nisar et al. (2015), several factors were pointed out to be leading to juvenile delinquency. Such factors included economic family, and peers. According to the research, these factors play a big part in the development of juvenile delinquency. Additionally, research shows that these factors are interconnected with one another and have the capability to intensify juvenile delinquency.

Another problem as put across in an article published in the Washington Post, is that the police and the advocates for juvenile justice are not agreeing with how the reform bill has been implemented (Thomas, 2021). Juvenile advocates suggest that juveniles should not be treated as adults yet the police do everything in their power to treat them no differently than adult violators. However, Randy Bowman, former leader of the juvenile justice agency of Kansas city, pointed out that the problem might be lack of data that can be analyzed to understand fully what is happening with the justice reform bill and in the corridors of the said justice (Shoenberg, 2019).

Family dysfunction plays a significant part in the development of young adults engaging in criminal activities. Elements such as neglect, abuse, and absence of supervision from juvenile parents can be crucial motivators of juvenile delinquency. Study shows that children who grow up in families where either or both of the parents have a drinking problem or abuse drugs have a high risk of committing criminal activities. Such behaviors from the parents increase the risk of their kids becoming juvenile delinquents. Furthermore, children who are subjected to domestic violence or any other form of abuse are at an increased risk of becoming involved in criminal activities. This risk is compounded when the abuse occurs in the home.

Peer pressure is another vital motivator to the problem of adolescents engaging in criminality. According to Nisar et al. (2015) and an article from ABC News, adolescents who tend to hang out with their delinquent peers have a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities as well (Ritter, n.d). The reason behind this can be because they want to fit in to conform to the expectations of their social group or as the experts put it, their teen brains are still immature to comprehend which behavior traits are wrong and which ones are right (Ritter, n.d). Additionally, the pressure from their peers can be the main reason for them to also engage in criminal activities. In addition, the influence of one's peers might motivate adolescents to participate in risky behaviors such as the use of illegal drugs and stealing.

Economic problems also play a role in juveniles engaging in criminal activities. To be specific, elements such as lack of access to education, unemployment, and poverty can all lead to adolescent delinquency and promote juvenile offenses (Thomas, 2021). Children who are brought up in households that have a low income are at a higher risk of committing criminal offenses. This is due to a financial constraint at home that causes stress in the homes hence motivating the children to commit crimes so that they can afford basic needs. Additionally, the situations force them to enter social groups where their peers influence them to commit criminal offenses.

**Goals**

The juvenile justice reform policy is a continuous process that advocates for the rehabilitation of young offenders. It focuses on increasing rehabilitation options among juvenile delinquents instead of imprisonment of young offenders. Furthermore, the policy aims at reducing recidivism as well as improving public safety. Thus, it focuses on making the juvenile justice system more effective. One of the primary goals of the policy is to ensure that delinquents are given rehabilitation options hence ensuring that young offenders are better served by the system. Achieving this goal entails offering young delinquents access to education. Additionally, it entails providing medical treatments for their conditions to help them in changing their lives. Based on the research findings by Bazemore and Schiff (2013), identified that juvenile justice reform policy was effective in changing the lives of offenders.

According to the authors, the policy provided positive outcomes for young offenders. The positive outcome was a result of addressing the root causes of why young offenders commit crimes in the first place. These factors included economic struggles, child trauma, mental illness, and so forth. Additionally, the policymakers hoped to cut down the increasing number of young offenders by using the juvenile justice reform policy. Another important goal of the reform policy is to lower the rate of recidivism among young offenders. This requires the implementation of interventions and programs that are supported by evidence and are effective in lowering the rate of recidivism. Treatment for substance abuse, anger management classes, or cognitive behavioral therapy are examples of the types of services that may be provided by juvenile justice systems to assist young offenders in addressing the underlying causes of their behavior and developing more constructive coping strategies.

In addition, it has been established that restorative justice programs, which center on making amends for wrongdoing and repairing broken links between offenders and the people they have wronged, can lower the rate of recidivism (Bazemore & Schiff, 2013). Policymakers anticipate that if they are successful in decreasing recidivism, they will not only improve outcomes for individual juvenile offenders, but they will also promote public safety by reducing crime and the number of people who are victims of crime.

The enhancement of the efficiency and fairness of the juvenile justice system is yet another essential objective of the policy aimed at reforming the juvenile justice system. This may involve the establishment of procedures that are supported by evidence, the reduction of racial and ethnic imbalances within the system, as well as an increase in accountability and openness. According to Bazemore and Schiff (2013), "Juvenile justice reform programs attempt to assure that the system functions in a way that is consistent with the values of fairness, due process, and the best interests of the child." (Bazemore and Schiff, 2013). This involves striking a balance between the purposes of punishment and rehabilitation, as well as ensuring that the juvenile justice system is administered in a way that respects the rights and dignity of young people.

**Evaluation of the Policy**

Juvenile justice reform policies have been put in place to address social problems, including the rising number of youth offenders and the need to reduce crime rates. This section evaluates the effectiveness of juvenile justice reform policies in achieving their intended goals and the unintended consequences of these policies. Numerous peer-reviewed articles have evaluated the effectiveness of juvenile justice reform policies.

For instance, in their article, Cauffman et al. (2018) discussed the impact of developmental science on juvenile justice reform. The authors examined how the insights from developmental science have been applied to juvenile justice policies and the impact of these policies on juvenile offenders. The authors found that incorporating the knowledge from developmental science in the design of juvenile justice reform policies has led to more effective interventions, improved outcomes for juvenile offenders, and reduced recidivism rates.

Similarly, restorative justice is a process that focuses on repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. It prioritizes the needs of the victims and encourages the offender to take responsibility for their actions. This approach contrasts with the traditional justice system, which often focuses on punishing the offender rather than repairing the harm caused. Juvenile justice reform policies have increasingly integrated restorative justice practices. This integration has been motivated by research that suggests that traditional punitive measures may not be as effective in reducing recidivism rates and rehabilitating young offenders. Instead, restorative justice practices aim to create a more holistic approach to juvenile justice reform that considers the needs of all parties involved.

Bazemore and Schiff's (2013) study examined the impact of restorative justice practices on juvenile justice reform. The authors found that restorative justice practices have been effective in reducing recidivism rates. This finding is significant because it suggests that restorative justice practices may be a more effective approach to reducing reoffending compared to traditional punitive measures.

Moreover, the authors found that restorative justice practices improve victim satisfaction. Victims of crime often feel alienated by the traditional justice system, which can be impersonal and focus solely on punishing the offender. Restorative justice practices, on the other hand, provide a platform for victims to communicate their needs and participate in the process of repairing the harm caused.

Additionally, the authors found that restorative justice practices promote positive relationships between offenders and the community. Traditional punitive measures often result in offenders feeling stigmatized and isolated from their communities. Restorative justice practices, however, prioritize the offender's reintegration into their community and encourage them to take responsibility for their actions. This approach can lead to a more positive and productive relationship between the offender and their community.

However, Birckhead (2011) argued that juvenile justice reform policies should be more comprehensive to address the underlying issues that contribute to youth offending. The author noted that current policies tend to focus on punishment and control rather than rehabilitation and reintegration. As a result, the policies fail to address the root causes of youth offending, such as poverty, lack of education, and mental health problems.

The National Research Council (2014) evaluated the impact of federal juvenile justice reform policies on reducing juvenile crime rates. The authors found that the policies have led to a decline in juvenile crime rates and have improved the outcomes of juvenile offenders. However, the authors also noted that the policies have not been implemented uniformly across states, leading to disparities in outcomes for juvenile offenders.

On the other hand, Tanenhaus (2013) discussed the unintended consequences of juvenile justice reform policies. The author noted that policies such as mandatory minimum sentences and zero-tolerance policies have resulted in increased incarceration rates and longer sentences for juvenile offenders. Moreover, these policies have disproportionately affected minority and low-income youth, leading to the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Cate (2016) examined the politics of prison reform in three US states, including Texas, California, and Pennsylvania. The author found that the policies implemented in these states have led to a reduction in juvenile crime rates and improved outcomes for juvenile offenders. However, the author also noted that the policies have been driven by political interests and have not always been based on evidence-based practices.

**Recommendations**

Juvenile justice reform has been a topic of intense debate for many years, with conflicting opinions regarding its operation, goals, and potential reforms. While some have advocated for a corrective approach, there have been recent efforts to reform the system to focus more on rehabilitation rather than punishment. However, the complexity of the issue and the lack of consensus on the best approach make it challenging to achieve significant progress. Therefore, this section will evaluate the current juvenile justice reform policy and propose recommendations for changes that should be addressed.

One of the primary issues with the current juvenile justice system is the overreliance on incarceration, despite numerous studies showing its ineffectiveness in reducing juvenile delinquency and preventing future criminal behavior (Bazemore, & Schiff, 2013). Furthermore, it can have negative consequences such as increased rates of recidivism, emotional trauma, and stigmatization. Thus, a recommendation that could be implemented is reducing the use of incarceration and exploring alternative forms of punishment and rehabilitation.

Another issue with the current policy is the lack of attention paid to the root causes of delinquency, including poverty, family dysfunction, and lack of access to education and employment opportunities (Bazemore, & Schiff, 2013). Addressing these underlying issues requires a holistic approach, and it might take numerous strategies to achieve the desired results. Therefore, it is recommended to invest more resources in addressing these issues and providing young people with the support and resources they need to succeed.

The education system is a specific area where this could be done, considering research shows that education is a critical factor in preventing delinquency and promoting positive outcomes for young people. However, many young people in the juvenile justice system have experienced disruptions in their education, such as frequent school transfers, suspensions, and expulsions. Therefore, to reduce confusion, it is recommended to provide better educational opportunities for young people in the system, such as high-quality alternative schools and vocational training programs (Cauffman et al, 2018).

Furthermore, restorative justice practices, such as victim-offender mediation and community service, are effective in reducing recidivism and promoting positive outcomes for both offenders and victims. Therefore, it is recommended to increase the use of these practices in the juvenile justice system and provide training for professionals in the field.

If changes were made to the policy, there might be some collateral consequences to consider. For example, reducing the use of incarceration might lead to a need for alternative forms of punishment and rehabilitation, such as community service or restitution. This could require additional resources and training for professionals in the field, which adds to the problem. Similarly, investing in education and addressing underlying issues might require additional funding and resources, which could be challenging in times of budget constraints. The potential consequences add more complexity to the issue, but it is necessary to consider them when making policy changes.

**Conclusion**

Juvenile justice reform policies have led to positive outcomes such as reduced recidivism rates and improved outcomes for juvenile offenders. However, there have also been unintended consequences such as disparities in outcomes for juvenile offenders and the perpetuation of social inequalities. Only by working together can we create a system that truly serves the needs of young people and helps them to reach their full potential It is recommended that the policy focus more on rehabilitation and reintegration, incorporate developmental science in the design of policies, avoid mandatory minimum sentences and zero-tolerance policies, and be implemented uniformly across all states.

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