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Children in Crises.
Problems: Solutions and Hope

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ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

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Children in Crises. Problems: Solutions and Hope

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Abstract

This paper outlines the crisis that America's children are experiencing. It investigates staggering statistics, cultural and environmental contextual factors that are contributing to this crisis. School and community violence are creating a generation of children and adolescents who are prone to more behavioral and violent behaviors. The educational system must become an integral part of the solution. Administrators, teachers, parents and politicians must take an active role through a variety of programs and initiatives to guide these young individuals into the right direction. Without specific interventions and guidance that are well designed the crisis will continue and there will be little to no hope for change in America. A variety of successful options and interventions to bringing change to the school environment or community are cited. Action will result in change for all.

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Children living in the 21st century face many critical issues. The issues are not new and have remained fairly consistent in their presence throughout the decades. It seems ironic that we have become more technologically savvy and more efficient in our everyday lives yet we still have many children who are casualties. We still have many poor, undernourished, neglected, abused, violent teenagers and children who succeed in achieving an early death or incarceration. A sad fact is that many states in America they are able to predict with a good level of accuracy how many prison beds they will need ten years down the road based on school standardized tests and number of students at-risk or receiving specialized services in elementary school.

The following were reported by the Children's Defense Fund (2009). There are approximately 74 million children in the United States of America. A child is born into poverty every 33 seconds, is abused or neglected every 35 seconds, and is born uninsured every 39 seconds. A child dies before his or her first birthday every 18 minutes. A child or teen is killed by gunfire every 3 hours. Almost 1 in 13 children in the United States, 5.8 million, lives in extreme poverty. More than half of all poor children in the United States live in eight states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Georgia and Michigan. The child poverty rate is 18.2% as of January 2010.

There are more poor White, non-Hispanic children than Black children. However, Hispanic and Black children are about three times as likely to live in poverty than White, non-Hispanic children. Children who live in inner cities, rural areas, in the South or in female-headed families are more likely to be poor. Children under age six are more likely to be poor than school-age children. Poverty and race are the primary factors underpinning the pipeline to prison. In fact, Black juveniles are about four times as likely as their White peers to end up being incarcerated.(CDC, 2009).

More than 14 million children in America are poor, but they live in working families. Research in education has proven that children who live in poverty are more likely to lag behind their peers, are less healthy, trail in emotional and intellectual development and are less likely to graduate from high school. Keeping children in poverty costs a half trillion dollars in lost productivity, poorer health and increased crime. To end child poverty there has to be investment in quality education, livable wages for families, child care support and health coverage.(CDC, 2009).

With poverty comes often times violence. There are many unintentional firearm injuries occurring throughout the United States. Unintentional shootings account for nearly 20 percent of all firearm related fatalities among children ages 14 and under, compared with 3 percent for the entire U.S. population. The unintentional firearm injury death rate among children ages 14 and under in the United States is nine times higher than in 25 other industrialized countries combined. (CDC, 2010).

Approximately one-third of families with children representing more than 22 million children in 11 million homes keep at least one gun in the house. Nearly all childhood unintentional shooting deaths occur in and or around the home. Fifty percent occur in the home of the victim, and nearly 40 percent occur in the home of a friend or relative. The gun of choice is a handgun. Unintentional shootings seem to occur outside of school when children are unsupervised (4-5pm, weekends, summer months and holidays) (CDF, 2009).

Staggering statistics from the Children's Defense Fund 2009 indicate that the number of children killed by guns in 2006 would fill more than 127 public school

classrooms of 25 students each. More preschoolers were killed by firearms than law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. Since 1979, gun violence has ended the lives of 107,603 children and teens in America. One in three black boys and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of going to prison in their lifetime. Boys are five times more likely to go to prison than girls however the number of girls in the juvenile system is on the rise dramatically. We have to begin changing our education system so that children and teenagers do not enter the pipeline to prison or early death.

We can begin by treating children at risk as potentially productive members of society, instead of lost causes in prison cages. We need to empower children to have a vision of their future and the role they play in those goals being attained. It is key that communities begin establishing community based alternatives to detention or jail.

Children at risk need to be looked at individually and receive individualized and developmentally appropriate services and direction. There has to be better collaboration between all the agencies who service this population. Improving collaboration with mental health agencies, child welfare system, juvenile justice system and education professionals would go a long way in improving these long standing problems. The system of care needs to be ongoing and do follow up with these youths so that once they are back on the streets they can function as productive members of society and not become a returning visitor to the juvenile correction system.

There are 9-10 million uninsured children in America. Every 39 seconds a child is born uninsured meaning that more than 2200 children are born every day uninsured. The number of children enrolled in the State Children's Health Insurance Program is approximately over 7 million. There are over 28 million children enrolled in Medicaid. Children enrollment account for over 49% of all people enrolled in Medicaid. The medical expenditures for children only accounts for about 22% of total Medicaid expenditures. (CDF, 2009). The US health care system is in crisis.

Education in the United States is also in crisis. School districts do not have the money to adequately fund programs, salaries and services. The amount spent per pupil in public schools is around eight thousand dollars a student.

Child Welfare system is also in chaos in this country. The number of children who are victims of abuse and neglect tops over 900,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008). If we break down the abuse by category Neglect and Medical Neglect accounts for 73% of all cases. Physical Abuse is about 16%. Sexual Abuse is 9.5-10%. Psychological and other maltreatment is about 15%, (National Data on Child Abuse, 2007). The number of children in foster care is over 500,000. The average length of stay in foster care is about 27.2 months. The research indicates that if a child or youth is in two or fewer placements they are more likely to remain there less than 12 months is about 84%. The more placements the child or youth is at the more likely the placements will be longer and more than 24 months is about 32%.

The amount of grandparents raising their grandchildren is almost 3 million individuals. This in itself is becoming part of the national norm. Many children who end up in foster care (500,000) only about 50, 000 ever get adopted permanently into homes. (CDC, 2010).

Youths at risk in the United States do not graduate from high school. The national dropout rate is anywhere from 6.7% to 30% in some communities with a 15-20% unemployment rate. The number of juvenile arrests in America was almost 1.3 million youths in 2010. These youths end up in either jail or residential facilities and account

for huge tax burdens on certain states and communities. It is almost 2.8 times more expensive to keep a youth in jail than it is to keep them in school. (CDC, 2010).

In a nationwide survey of high school students, about 6% reported not going to school on one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to and from school (CDC 2010). Nearly 700,000 young people ages 10 to 24 are treated in emergency departments each year for injuries sustained due to violence-related assaults (CDC 2009). On average, 16 persons between the ages of 10 and 24 are murdered each day in the United States (CDC 2009). In addition to causing injury and death, youth violence affects communities by increasing the cost of health care, reducing productivity, decreasing property values, and disrupting social services (Mercy et al. 2002).

Despite the nationwide outrage in response to some of these cases, the number of juveniles age 12 or younger who are involved in murder is relatively small. Between 1980 and 1997, about 2 percent (or 600 cases) of murders involved such child offenders, and the annual number of these murders was relatively stable, averaging about 30 per year. According to the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Reports (Snyder, 2001): The large majority (84 percent) of children who murdered are male. Seventy percent of the murder victims of child delinquents were male and likely to be acquaintances or family members. More than one-half (54 percent) of the murder victims of child delinquents were killed with a firearm.

Schools are violent in the United States but relatively safe places in other parts of the world. Why is there more violence in America than anywhere else? What are we doing differently or wrong? What are European schools doing well? Finland has one of the top school systems in the world. The answers are embedded in the culture. American culture is very egocentric base and the rights of the individual are the prime focus. In these other cultures you are an individual within a social group whether it be family or community. Your rights do not supersede all the rights of others.

Research on youth violence has increased our understanding of factors that make some populations more vulnerable to victimization and perpetration. Risk factors increase the likelihood that a young person will become violent and/or at risk. However, risk factors are not direct causes of youth violence; instead, risk factors contribute to youth violence (Mercy et al. 2002; DHHS 2001). Research associates the following risk factors with perpetration of youth violence (DHHS 2001; Lipsey and Derzon 1998; Resnick et al. 2004): A number of factors can increase the risk of a youth engaging in violence.

Risk factors for youth violence include:

- Prior history of violence
- Drug, alcohol, or tobacco use
- Association with delinquent peers
- Poor family functioning
- Poor grades in school
- Poverty in the community

Individual Risk Factors

- History of violent victimization
- Attention deficits, hyperactivity or learning disorders
- History of early aggressive behavior
- Involvement with drugs, alcohol or tobacco
- Low IQ

- Poor behavioral control
- Deficits in social cognitive or information-processing abilities
- High emotional distress
- History of treatment for emotional problems
- Antisocial beliefs and attitudes
- Exposure to violence and conflict in the family

Family Risk Factors

- Authoritarian childrearing attitudes
- Harsh, lax or inconsistent disciplinary practices
- Low parental involvement
- Low emotional attachment to parents or caregivers
- Low parental education and income
- Parental substance abuse or criminality
- Poor family functioning
- Poor monitoring and supervision of children

Peer/Social Risk Factors

- Association with delinquent peers
- Involvement in gangs
- Social rejection by peers
- Lack of involvement in conventional activities
- Poor academic performance
- Low commitment to school and school failure

Community Risk Factors

- Diminished economic opportunities
- High concentrations of poor residents
- High level of transiency
- High level of family disruption
- Low levels of community participation
- Socially disorganized neighborhood

Protective factors buffer young people from the risks of becoming violent. These factors exist at various levels. To date, protective factors have not been studied as extensively or rigorously as risk factors. However, identifying and understanding protective factors are equally as important as researching risk factors. Studies propose the following protective factors (DHHS 2001; Resnick et al. 2004):

Individual/Family Protective Factors

- Intolerant attitude toward deviance
- High IQ
- High grade point average
- Positive social orientation
- Religiosity
- Connectedness to family or adults outside the family
- Ability to discuss problems with parents
- Perceived parental expectations about school performance are high
- Frequent shared activities with parents

- Consistent presence of parent during at least one of the following: when awakening, when arriving home from school, at evening mealtime or going to bed
- Involvement in social activities

Peer/Social Protective Factors

- Commitment to school
- Involvement in social activities

The protective factors can easily be developed, monitored and enhanced with the right kind of leadership on the part of school and community personnel.

The problems of urban schools are particularly acute and complicated by their connection to poverty, crime and despair in the urban environment. Effective interventions will depend on schools being able to identify early the issues for students and support them in a way that leads to students becoming independent problem solvers and better communicators. In working in school environments it is important that educational agencies be aware of the following that contribute to a more positive environment and less likely to have children be in crisis.

Sense of belonging. In addition to positive relationships, both students and staff experience school as meaningful, productive, and relevant. Active student participation in decision making is emphasized, as well as activities, such as service learning, that promote a sense of community and belonging.

Positive behavior supports. Emphasis is placed on the use of positive rather than punitive techniques.

High expectations. Teachers, students, and parents expect success in both academic and behavioral endeavors and provide the necessary supports to achieve these expectations.

Social and emotional skills. Deliberate efforts are made to develop social and emotional competencies among all students.

Parent and community involvement. Family and community members are viewed as valuable resources and their active involvement in the school's mission is strongly encouraged.

Fairness and clarity of rules. Students perceive rules as being clear, fair, and not overly harsh.

School safety. Students, teachers, and families perceive the school as safe. (Consortium to Prevent School Violence, 2010)

“Preventing delinquency”, says Peter Greenwood, “not only saves young lives from being wasted, but also prevents the onset of adult criminal careers and thus reduces the burden of crime on its victims and on society. It costs states billions of dollars a year to arrest, prosecute, incarcerate, and treat juvenile offenders. Investing in successful delinquency-prevention programs can save taxpayers seven to ten dollars for every dollar invested, primarily in the form of reduced spending on prisons.” (Peter Greenwood)

Teaching tolerance in elementary schools reduces the incidence of hate crimes, racism, discrimination, and bigotry. Children are aware of racial and gender differences at a very young age, and by age twelve they have formed stereotypes. In fact, tolerance education is most effective between the ages of four and nine years. Therefore, it is important to teach tolerance to young children and continue reinforcing the message over time. Age-appropriateness is involved in the creation of the different curricula that educators have developed. For instance, part of the

curriculum includes classroom exercises from newsletters and newspaper sections directed toward younger audiences. Additional methods include short theatrical productions and role-playing exercises. (NCPC)

The following programs have been researched and documented by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2006). Each one of these alternative strategies has been well documented and has proven success with a variety of children at risk:

1-Academic Skills Enhancement programs use instructional methods designed to increase student engagement in the learning process and hence increase their academic performance and bonding to the school (e.g., cooperative learning techniques and "experiential learning" strategies).

2-Aftercare is a re-integrative service that prepares out-of-home placed juveniles for reentry into the community by establishing the necessary collaborative arrangements with the community to ensure the delivery of prescribed services and supervision. A comprehensive aftercare process typically begins after sentencing and continues through incarceration and an offender's release into the community.

3-Afterschool/Recreation programs offer rewarding, challenging, and age-appropriate activities in a safe, structured, and positive environment. They may reduce delinquency by way of a socializing effect through which youth learn positive virtues such as discipline or simply reduce the opportunity for youth to engage in delinquency.

4-Alternative Schools are essentially specialized educational environments that place a great deal of emphasis on small classrooms, high teacher-to-student ratios, individualized instruction, noncompetitive performance assessments, and less structured classrooms. The purpose of these schools is to provide academic instruction to students expelled or suspended for disruptive behavior or weapons possession, or who are unable to succeed in the mainstream school environment.

5-Classroom Curricula are classroom-based instruction programs designed to teach students factual information; increase their awareness of social influences to engage in misbehavior; expand their repertoires for recognizing and appropriately responding to risky or potentially harmful situation (e.g., drug use, gang involvement, violence); increase their appreciation for diversity in society; improve their moral character; improve conflict resolution skills; and encourage accountability.

6-Conflict Resolution / Interpersonal Skills building refers to a wide range of processes that encourage nonviolent dispute resolution. In general, these processes teach young people decision-making skills to better manage conflict in juvenile facilities, schools, and communities. Youth learn to identify their interests, express their views, and seek mutually acceptable solutions to disputes. Common forms of conflict resolution include: negotiation, mediation, arbitration, community conferencing, and peer mediation. Similarly, interpersonal skill building focuses on developing the social skills required for an individual to interact in a positive way with others. The basic skills model begins with an individual's goals, progresses to how these goals should be translated into appropriate and effective social behaviors, and concludes with the impact of the behavior on the social environment.

7-Day Treatment facilities (or day reporting centers) are highly structured, community-based, post-adjudication, nonresidential programs for serious juvenile offenders. The goals of day treatment are to provide intensive supervision to ensure community safety and a wide range of services to the offender to prevent future delinquent behaviors. The intensive supervision is fulfilled by requiring the offender to report to the facility on a daily basis at specified times for a specified length of

time. Generally, programs are provided at the facility during the day and/or evening at least 5 days a week. Special weekend activities may also be conducted.

8-Drug Court is a type of specialty court established within and supervised by juvenile courts to provide specialized services for eligible drug-involved youth and their families. In general, drug courts provide (1) intensive supervision over delinquency and status offense cases that involve substance-abusing juveniles and (2) coordinated and supervised delivery of an array of support services necessary to address the problems that contribute to juvenile involvement in the justice system. The services typically include: substance abuse treatment, mental health, primary care, family, and education.

9-Home Confinement w/wo EM or house arrest with and without electronic monitoring (EM) is a community corrections program designed to restrict the activities of offenders in the community. This sanction allows offenders to remain in their homes, go to work, run errands, attend school, and maintain other responsibilities. However, their activities are closely monitored (either electronically and/or by frequent staff contacts) to ensure that they comply with the conditions set by the court. Offenders placed under home confinement are restricted to their residence for varying lengths of time and are required to maintain a strict schedule of daily activities.

10-Leadership and Youth Development programs prevent problems behaviors by preparing young people to meet the challenges of adolescence through a series of structured, progressive activities and experiences that help them obtain social, emotional, ethical, physical, and cognitive competencies. This approach views youth as resources and builds on their strengths and capabilities to develop within their own community. It focuses on the acquisition of adequate attitudes, behaviors, and skills.

11-Mentoring involves a relationship over a prolonged period of time between two or more people where an older, caring, more experienced individual provides help to the younger person as he or she goes through life. The goal of mentoring is to support the development of healthy individuals by addressing the need for positive adult contact and, thereby, reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors for problem behavior.

12-School/Classroom Environment programs seek to reduce or eliminate problem behaviors by changing the overall context in which they occur. These strategies may include interventions to change the decision-making processes or authority structures (building school capacity); redefining norms for behavior and signaling appropriate behavior through the use of rules (setting norms for behavior); reorganizing classes or grades to create smaller units, continuing interaction, or different mixes of students, or to provide greater flexibility in instruction (classroom organization); and the use of rewards and punishments and the reduction of down time (classroom management).

13-Truancy Prevention is designed to promote regular school attendance through one or more strategies including an increase in parental involvement, the participation of law enforcement, the use of mentors, court alternatives, or other related strategies.

14-Vocational/Job Training programs address youth crime and unemployment by providing participants with social, personal, and vocational skills and employment opportunities to help them achieve economic success, avoid involvement in criminal activity, and subsequently increase social and educational functioning.

15-Wilderness Camps or challenge programs are generally residential placements that provide participants with a series of physically challenging activities,

such as backpacking or rock climbing in an outdoor setting. These programs vary widely in terms of settings, types of activities, and therapeutic goals; but their treatment components are grounded in experiential learning which advocates "learning by doing" and facilitates opportunities for personal growth.

16-Wraparound / Case Management is a system of care that "wraps" a comprehensive array of individualized services and support around youth and their families to keep delinquent youth at home and out of institutions whenever possible. Treatment services are usually provided by multiple agencies working together as part of a collaborative interagency agreement, and each youth's treatment plan is determined by an interdisciplinary team consisting of a caseworker, family and community members, and several social services and mental health professionals. Individual case management is a less intense form of the wraparound approach where individual caseworkers guide youth through the existing social services or juvenile justice system and ensure that they receive appropriate services. (JJSP, 2006)

The most promising school and community prevention programs for children at risk focus on programs for improvement and change. (Herrenkohl et al.,2001). The following types of school and community prevention programs have shown great success and change.

Multi-component classroom-based programs are instrumental in teaching children how to understand their emotions and their behaviors. Within the school environment there are many different areas that can be used to teach the child new skills. The opportunity to generalize their learning is frequent and well monitored.

Social competence promotion curriculums empower students to learn new social skills that they can generalize to their everyday life in and out of school. These curriculums can enable the child to role play in a safe environment and learn which skills are the social norm in that community.

Conflict resolution and violence prevention curriculums enable children to understand how to regulate and understand their emotions. They become better able to mediate their problems and learn a system of conflict resolution other than one based in violence.

Bullying prevention programs are nationwide and abundant. There are several programs that recently have focused on teaching and educating both teachers and student on how to prevent bullying, how to report bullying and how not to be a victim of bullying.

Afterschool recreation programs have been instrumental in guiding children to leave the street and stay in a protected environment where they are supervised and guided to learn and participate in safe activities. These recreational activities have been known to teach as well as counsel children who are having difficulties.

Mentoring programs have given specific vocational and interest based skills to children who may not have had any type of goal or direction in their life. These programs have exposed and introduced troubled children with hope and promise at having a possible career or just positive adult or youth role models.

School organization programs have helped children to have choices to funnel their energy beyond criminal activity. These programs have allowed children to become involved in positive ways and to be connected to their school. It has allowed children to build a sense of school pride and to belong to something that values their participation.

Comprehensive community interventions have become important in reclaiming a community from drug and crime infested behaviors. The rebirth of some communities by regaining control and driving out the negative factors that could and

do influence children to a life of crime have been eradicated and replaced with positive actions and programs that have offered children new options and new hope. Several of these unique programs have demonstrated that interventions with young children can reduce later delinquency.

Preparing for the Drug Free Years (PDFY), a program for parents of children in grades 4 through 8, is designed to reduce adolescent drug use and behavior problems. PDFY's skill-based curriculum helps parents address risks that can contribute to drug abuse while strengthening family bonding by building protective factors. PDFY is grounded theoretically in the social development model which emphasizes that young people should experience opportunities for active involvement in family, school, and community, should develop skills for success, and should be given recognition and reinforcement for positive effort and improvement. PDFY focuses on strengthening family bonds and establishing clear standards for behavior, helping parents more appropriately manage their child's behavior while encouraging their development. PDFY reaches parents before their children begin experimenting with drugs. Sessions focus on family relationships and communication, family management skills, and resolution of family conflict. (Hawkins & Casatelon, 1999)

The HOMEBUILDERS Program is one of the best documented Intensive Family Preservation Programs in the country. The program is designed to break the cycle of family dysfunction by strengthening families, keeping children safe, and preventing foster care, residential and other forms of out-of-home placement. The program goals include improving family functioning; increasing social support; increasing parenting skills; preventing or reducing child abuse and neglect; improving school and job attendance and performance; improving household living conditions; establishing daily routines; improving adult and child self-esteem; helping clients become self-directed; and enhancing motivation for change while decreasing family conflict and other problems.

The program is designed for the most seriously troubled families, who are referred by a number of child service agencies. Populations served include newborns to teenagers, and their families. The program includes 4-6 weeks of intensive, in-home services to children and families. A practitioner with a caseload of two families provides counseling, hard services, develops community support, and spends an average of 8-10 hours per week in direct contact with the family, and is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week for crisis intervention. The program utilizes a single practitioner model with a team back-up for co-therapy and consultation. Teaching strategies involve modeling, descriptions of skills and behaviors, role plays and rehearsals of newly acquired skills. Teaching tools include skills-based video- and audio-tapes, work books, handouts, articles and exercises. Therapeutic processes used are skill building, behavioral interventions, motivational interviewing, relapse prevention, rational emotive therapy, and other cognitive strategies. (Charlotte Booth, 2002).

In conclusion, there is hope. Services and resources are available provided we teach a variety of professionals how to serve these families and children at risk. There will always be children at risk and in crisis as long as there is inequality and injustice in our system and society. Change can and needs to begin now.

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