



RCT of a promising vocational/employment program for high-risk juvenile offenders

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ABSTRACT

Juvenile offenders with substance use problems are at high risk for deleterious long-term outcomes. This study evaluated the capacity of a promising vocational and employment training program in the building sector (i.e., Community Restitution Apprenticeship-Focused Training, CRAFT) to mitigate such outcomes through enhanced employment and education. Participants were 97 high-risk juvenile offenders (mean age = 15.8 years) randomized to CRAFT versus education as usual (EAU) intervention conditions. Multi-method procedures measured employment, education, substance use, mental health, and criminal outcomes through a 30-month post-baseline follow-up. CRAFT was significantly more effective than EAU at increasing rates of youth employment and GED attendance. Intervention effects were not observed, however, for months employed, hours worked, or hourly wage. Measures of youth substance use, mental health symptoms, and criminal activity showed no favorable or iatrogenic effects. The potential of CRAFT was modestly supported, and suggestions were made for future research.

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1. Introduction

Juvenile offenders with substance use problems represent a large and underserved population that is at high risk of presenting significant deleterious outcomes and long-term costs for themselves, their families and communities, and society (Chassin, 2008). Longitudinal research with clinical samples has shown that many substance abusing adolescents continue to abuse substances into emerging adulthood with detrimental results pertaining to educational attainments, mental health, social relationships, employment, and physical health (e.g., Brown, Myers, Mott, & Vik, 1994; Chan, Dennis, & Funk, 2008; Crowley, Mikulich, MacDonald, Young, & Zerbe, 1998; Henggeler, Clingempeel, Brondino, & Pickrel, 2002; Huang, Evans, Hara, Weiss, & Hser, 2011; Kaminer & Bukstein, 2008; Myers, Stewart, & Brown, 1998; Ringel, Ellickson, & Collins, 2007). Similarly, relatively high percentages of juvenile offenders maintain criminal activity into adulthood (e.g., Liberman, 2008; White, Bates, & Buyske, 2001). Such outcomes among substance abusing individuals are estimated to cost society more than \$180 billion each year, stemming from expenditures to address health care, drug-related crime, and reduced work productivity (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2004).

Within this context, the primary purpose of the present study was to evaluate a vocational training program (i.e., Community Restitution

Apprenticeship-Focused Training; CRAFT¹) that has shown promise (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000) in altering the negative life trajectories of juvenile offenders with substance-related problems. Employability is viewed as a critical issue in the field of substance abuse treatment (e.g., Institute of Medicine, 1998), and criminal justice theorists (e.g., Currie, 1998) have suggested that access to high paying jobs holds the potential to impact long-term rates of antisocial behavior. It is not the availability of short-term low-wage jobs for teenagers that inhibits crime, but rather the prospects for upward movement into fulfilling adult roles as productive, valued, and respected members in the larger community. Yet, as Bushway and Reuter (1997) noted, many high-risk juveniles lack the skills needed to obtain and retain attractive jobs that pay above minimum wage and can raise the employee above the poverty level. Thus, increased employability among high-risk adolescents might alter their life course trajectories and reduce the risk of developing potentially lifelong substance use, antisocial, and vocational impairment (Oesterle, Hawkins, & Hill, 2011).

CRAFT was developed in 1994 by the Home Builders Institute (HBI) specifically to address the frequent skill deficits and job-placement limitations that confront high-risk youths such as juvenile offenders and youths with substance abuse disorders (Home Builders Institute, 2012). HBI is the educational arm of the 200,000 member (e.g., home builders and remodelers, title lawyers, and suppliers such as Home Depot) National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). CRAFT is a pragmatic and ecologically valid strategy both for

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¹ CRAFT was launched in 1994, was renamed in 2006, and continues today as HBI PACT for Youth.

developing valued job skills and for placing high-risk youths on a path to attain well-paying jobs in the construction industry. Importantly, a multisite program evaluation (uncontrolled) has supported the potential effectiveness of CRAFT to boost employment and decrease antisocial behavior (Kiss, 1999). Consequently, CRAFT received a Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) award from the National Youth Employment Coalition (2002) recognizing the program as a best practice in youth development. Others identifying CRAFT as a promising model intervention include The United States Congress in 2005 (HBI, 2012), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2000), the Florida Department of Education and Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (2001), and The American Youth Policy Forum (James, 1999).

Notably, and as specified more extensively in the Method section, CRAFT includes several features that further reinforce its potential effectiveness for high-risk youths. First, as a model program of the NAHB that has membership associations across the nation, CRAFT has strong linkages to the world of skilled employment. For example, the Home Builder Association in Connecticut, the site of the study, had more than 1200 member firms employing more than 45,000 people throughout the state when the study began. Second, CRAFT has standardized, flexible, and comprehensive training procedures that include pre-vocational and vocational services, employability skills development, job placement assistance (e.g., local contractors collaborate in teaching various skills), and job retention assistance with follow-up. Third, intervention principles used in CRAFT are similar to those used by evidence-based treatments of adolescent substance abuse. These include a strength-based approach to building competencies, emphasis on ecological validity (e.g., engagement with families, employers, service providers, and state service systems), provision of comprehensive services, and monitoring of program fidelity. Together, these program features and favorable program evaluations support the potential effectiveness of CRAFT and set the stage for a rigorous evaluation of the program.

Before the methodology of the study is described, several pertinent conceptual and methodological issues should be addressed. First, the fidelity of implementation and internal validity of an employment-training program with substance-abusing and high-risk juvenile offenders can be undermined by a wide variety of psychosocial problems among the youths and their families (e.g., chaotic family environment, substance abuse, mental health problems). Hence, to enhance fidelity of implementation and internal validity, all youths were recruited from programs that had provided an evidence-based treatment to youths. These included multisystemic therapy (MST; Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 2009), multidimensional family therapy (MDFT; Liddle, 2010), and functional family therapy (FFT; Waldron & Brody, 2010) programs. Second, the timing of the study (i.e., 2007–2011) coincided with a major economic recession in the U.S., which was especially challenging to the construction industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). For example, during the research follow-ups conducted in 2010 the average rate of unemployment was 20.6% in the construction sector (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012b). Hence, the validity of the employment-related outcomes of the study is threatened by historical factors (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

A third issue pertains to the extant literature on the association between employment and antisocial behavior in adolescents. Although the primary hypothesis of the study is that CRAFT will provide high-risk youths with a path toward productive careers for the reasons noted above, findings from extant research dampen optimism. (a) To the best of our knowledge, no controlled studies support the capacity of a vocational intervention to favorably impact the functioning of juvenile offenders or substance abusing youths. (b) Vocational training programs have had limited success with adult substance abusers (e.g., Magura, Blankertz, Madison, Friedman, & Gomez, 2007; Svikis et al., 2012). (c) An extensive literature

demonstrates that employed youths generally evidence higher rates of antisocial behavior than do nonworking youths, and these findings hold for nonclinical youths (e.g., Apel, Bushway, Paternoster, Brame, & Sweeten, 2008; Samuolis, Griffin, Williams, Cesario, & Botvin, 2011; Wu, Schlenger, & Galvin, 2003) as well as for youths who receive substance abuse treatment (Godley, Passetti, & White, 2006). And (d), the potentially iatrogenic effects of intervention programs that group antisocial youths together have been well established (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006). These two latter sets of findings establish the importance of examining rates of youth antisocial behavior throughout the research.

A final conceptual issue pertains to the characteristics of vocational programs that might be best suited to this population. In a context where little controlled research on vocational training for juvenile offenders with substance use problems has been conducted, we decided to evaluate a well-specified approach with juvenile offenders that has received national recognition, has promising outcomes in uncontrolled research, and is supported by a major stakeholder in the labor sector (i.e., the NAHB). It should be noted, however, that other approaches to enhancing the employability of a high risk youth population might be viable as well. For example, a strong and consistent literature has emerged demonstrating the effectiveness of supported employment for adults and transitional age youths (i.e., age 18–25) with serious mental illness, many of whom have co-occurring substance use disorders (Bond, Drake, & Becker, 2008; Burke-Miller, Razzano, Grey, Blyler, & Cook, 2012). Rather than providing training in specific vocations per se, supported employment emphasizes client vocational choice across a range of fields, integrates mental health and vocational interventions, and provides long-term follow-along supports once work is obtained (Swanson, Becker, Drake, & Merrens, 2008). Indeed, recent meta-analysis of studies with adults with serious mental illness found large effect sizes for job attainment, weeks worked, and job retention, with results consistent regardless of substance abuse status (Campbell, Bond, & Drake, 2011).

Despite these concerns, the enormity of the public health burden and the economic productivity costs associated with substance abuse by juvenile offenders requires continued efforts to evaluate viable solutions. Godley et al. (2010) estimated that two million adolescents in the U.S. have substance abuse or dependence disorders and that half of these are involved in the juvenile justice system. The long-term social and economic costs on families and communities are staggering. With its promising program evaluations, comprehensive and ecologically valid intervention protocols, and conceptual similarities with several evidence-based treatments of delinquency and substance abuse in adolescents, CRAFT seems well suited for rigorous evaluation.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Design

The study followed a 2 (intervention type: CRAFT versus Education as Usual [EAU]) \times 6 (time: Baseline and 6, 12, 18, 24, and 30 months post-baseline) design, with random assignment of youths to intervention conditions. In addition to these semi-annual assessments, self-reported outcomes assessing the primary aims of CRAFT (e.g., the number of days worked in a given month, school attendance) and youth substance use were measured on a monthly basis to increase accuracy of recall.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 97 juvenile offenders who completed a family- and evidence-based treatment program for substance abuse, delinquent behavior, and associated problems. Inclusion criteria for the youths were: (a) age 15–18 years, (b) involvement in the juvenile justice system for the commission of a criminal offense, (c) referral by

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