Epilogue

Robert D. Hoge
Nancy G. Guerra
Paul Boxer

This book has provided an introduction to recent theoretical and practical developments relating to the treatment of the juvenile offender. Our chapters show that the combined efforts of researchers in a number of social science disciplines have yielded a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of youth crime, from development through treatment. We have endeavored to use that knowledge to provide concrete guidance regarding the treatment of youth in juvenile justice and correctional systems, believing that contemporary research on best practices offers clear, portable, and verifiable guidelines in this respect.

Considerable space also has been devoted to a review of relevant theory and research. This reflects our belief that practitioners in the field will benefit from a solid foundation in basic models and observations regarding the origins and development of antisocial behaviors in youth. We turn now to some directions for research and policy emerging from our reviews.

Future Research Directions

The chapters in this book highlight the considerable progress made in developing our understanding of the causes and treatment of antisocial behavior in youth. This understanding has emerged from a num-
ber of social science disciplines, but especially noteworthy is research and theory from the fields of developmental psychology and the psychology of youthful criminal conduct. This work has been facilitated by methodological advances, particularly those relating to meta-analysis and multivariate statistics. However, despite these significant advances, research gaps remain.

Research and theory have advanced our understanding of the individual and situational factors placing the youth at risk for criminal activity. However, knowledge of the dynamics of those risk factors is limited. For example, while we know that antisocial peer associations constitute a risk factor, the way in which they actually have an impact on the youth’s behavior—particularly in the context of treatments for antisocial behavior—is not always clear. Only recently have investigators begun to specify and fully test hypotheses regarding peer contagion effects in group-based interventions for delinquency. Another illustration involves a callous and unemotional interpersonal style. This is clearly a risk factor, but our understanding of how this style emerges and influences behavior remains somewhat limited. Despite a wealth of evidence linking callous-unemotional traits to general antisocial and violent behavior, it has yet to be shown whether these traits are driven by variations over time in emotional processing or moral reasoning, or how these traits are influenced by parents, peers, and communities.

Another gap in our knowledge concerns desistance from continued criminal activity. We have an understanding of what leads youth to antisocial behavior, but only limited understanding of why some youth persist in the criminal behavior and some do not. On a related note, our understanding of personal and contextual factors that promote or inhibit amenability to treatment is present only in broad strokes. These are issues that clearly have implications for treatment strategies.

Our understanding of the developmental processes involved in the emergence and maintenance of antisocial behaviors is also lacking. The distinction between life-course persistent and adolescent-onset delinquency is useful, but we require a more detailed picture of the factors influencing the appearance of antisocial behaviors at each stage of development, as well as of the factors that contribute to antisocial behavior sustained over time within individuals. A related area requiring more attention concerns the nature of the antisocial behavior. Researchers have identified a variety of useful distinctions, such as proactive versus reactive aggression and covert versus overt antisocial behavior, but much more work needs to be done. Studies of treatments for youth offenders still largely treats criminal activity as a uniform composite variable and fail to account for variability in the nature, severity, and chronicity of the activity.

Much research on antisocial behavior of youth has focused on Caucasian and African American males. Although the literature base is growing, information about the emergence and treatment of antisocial behaviors in females and other minority groups is still quite limited. Future research should recognize that the situation of youth can vary considerably according to individual and situational factors. For example, the needs of an African American adolescent female in a rural Southern U.S. community may differ in many respects from her counterpart in a large Northern city.

Various chapters in this book have shown considerable advances in our understanding of best practices. Sophisticated evaluation research combined with meta-analytic strategies has yielded important information about the features of effective programming. However, much of that research has been based on limited samples of youth and programming has been applied primarily under ideal experimental conditions high only in internal validity. We need more information about the features of programming that have an impact on outcomes, especially with regard to outcomes observed under more naturalistic experimental designs high in external or ecological validity—that is, those that mirror practices in the “real world.”

The failure of some of our intervention efforts does not necessarily correspond to an unwillingness to apply best practices or implement high-quality research designs; rather, it points to practical, economic, and political constraints that impede our efforts. We turn now to some of the policy implications of our reviews.

Policy Implications

Four general principles have guided the recommendations provided in this book: closer-to-home; rehabilitation; evidence-based; and risk-focused, strengths-based. Implementing programming based on these principles requires considerable efforts to influence public policy at national, local, and agency levels.

Perhaps the key policy initiative involves educating policy makers and the public about the efficacy of those principles. The major barriers to accomplishing that goal are the public’s fear of crime and the tendency of some politicians and policy makers to play on those fears and advocate the use of punitive crime-control strategies. However, public support for a system reflecting the four principles is essential for their implementation.
A second policy initiative should focus on creating the conditions for strong and viable families in which youth have an opportunity to develop their cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. This may involve effective early childhood and family support programs as well as family-friendly employment policies and more comprehensive and consistent strategies to reduce crime and other indicators of social and physical disorder in communities prone to those problems.

A third policy initiative involves ensuring that quality educational, mental health, and family support/protection services are available for all youth and all families. It is now clear that early prevention efforts represent the most effective means of discouraging the development of antisocial behaviors.

A fourth initiative should focus on providing coordinated services for all special-needs youth. This means that schools, mental health agencies, child protection services, and juvenile offender services must work together cooperatively to meet the needs of youth in a timely and effective manner. Confidentiality and other legal issues impeding this coordination must be resolved to ensure that effective services are provided.

A fifth initiative would focus on creating conditions within juvenile justice and correctional systems to ensure that the principles outlined above can be observed. This means obtaining adequate funds for creating these conditions, often a challenging barrier requiring considerable educational and political efforts. Efforts within agencies are also required. The careful selection and training of personnel is required for ensuring that agency professionals are capable and motivated to deliver effective services. The mental health practitioner working in the system—whether psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker—has an important role to play in encouraging the development of rehabilitative attitudes and practices among all workers in the system.

All of these policy initiatives involve challenging educational and political efforts. However, we have seen growing empirical support for the efficacy of interventions reflecting the closer-to-home, rehabilitation, evidence-based, and risk-focused, strengths-based principles. Also, as we have observed, growing evidence demonstrates that programs reflecting these principles are cost effective. In other words, they are important investments that can pay for themselves many times over in future reductions in criminal activity, school drop-out rates, and rates of mental health problems.

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