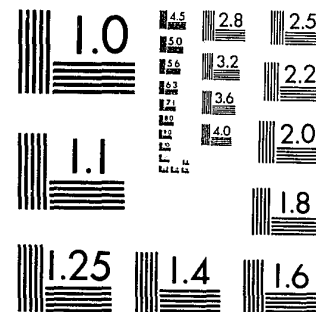


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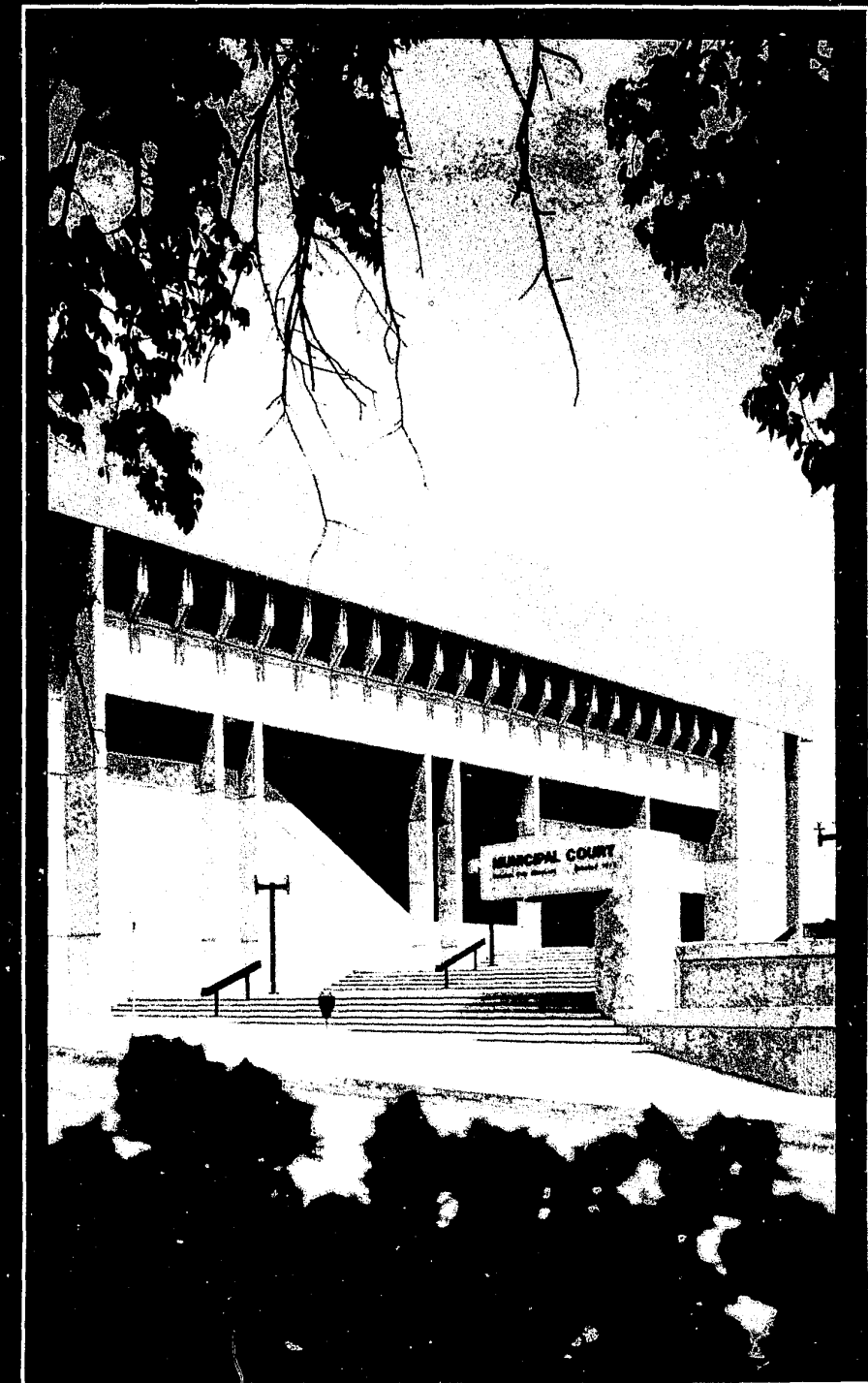
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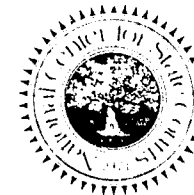
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On the Cover

The Kansas City, Missouri, Municipal Court Building, dedicated in 1974, houses the Kansas City Municipal Division of the 16th Judicial Circuit Court of Missouri as well as the offices of the city prosecutor and the probation division of the Community Services Department. The three-story concrete structure was designed by Linscott, Haylett, Wimmer and Wheat. Photo by Paul S. Kivett.

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Learning disabilities and

By Noel Duntivant

Editor's Note: This article summarizes the results of a research project initiated in 1976 by the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NIJJDP) to investigate the relationship between learning disabilities (LD) and juvenile delinquency. The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD) received funding from the Institute to develop and conduct a program of remedial instruction designed to improve the academic skills and reduce the delinquency of officially delinquent teenagers who were learning disabled. The National Center for State Courts (NCSC) was also commissioned by the Institute to undertake two large-scale studies of the relationship between LD and delinquency and to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the ACLD remediation program.

National Center staff conducted two investigations to determine whether LD is related to delinquency, and, if so, to examine the nature of that relationship. One of

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these was an age-cross-sectional study, which was based on a sample containing a cross-section of age groups measured at a single point in time. The sample was composed of 973 teenage boys from the public schools of Baltimore, Indianapolis, and Phoenix, who had no prior record of official delinquency, and 970 teenage boys from the juvenile courts and youth correctional facilities in the same three cities. The 1,943 youths were given a battery of tests to measure intellectual ability and academic achievement and were interviewed concerning their delinquent activities, attitude toward school, and sociodemographic backgrounds. Boys were classified as learning disabled or not on the basis of significant discrepancies between their scores on the ability (intelligence) tests and their actual achievement, together with the presence of perceptual and behavioral problems. The sample, which had an average age of 15 years, was 50 percent white, 35 percent black, and 15 percent other minority.

The second investigation consisted of a longitudinal study of 351 boys from the cross-sectional sample who had no history of official delinquency prior to the outset of the research. For these boys, 16 percent of whom had been classified as learning disabled, the interviews concerning their delinquent behavior and school attitude were repeated at one- and two-year intervals after the initial testing. In addition, court records were searched for information about any official contacts the boys had had with the juvenile court during the two-year period following

juvenile delinquency: A summary report

the original collection of data. At the outset of the study the follow-up sample had a mean age of 14 years and the following ethnic composition: 50 percent white, 37 percent black, and 13 percent other minority.

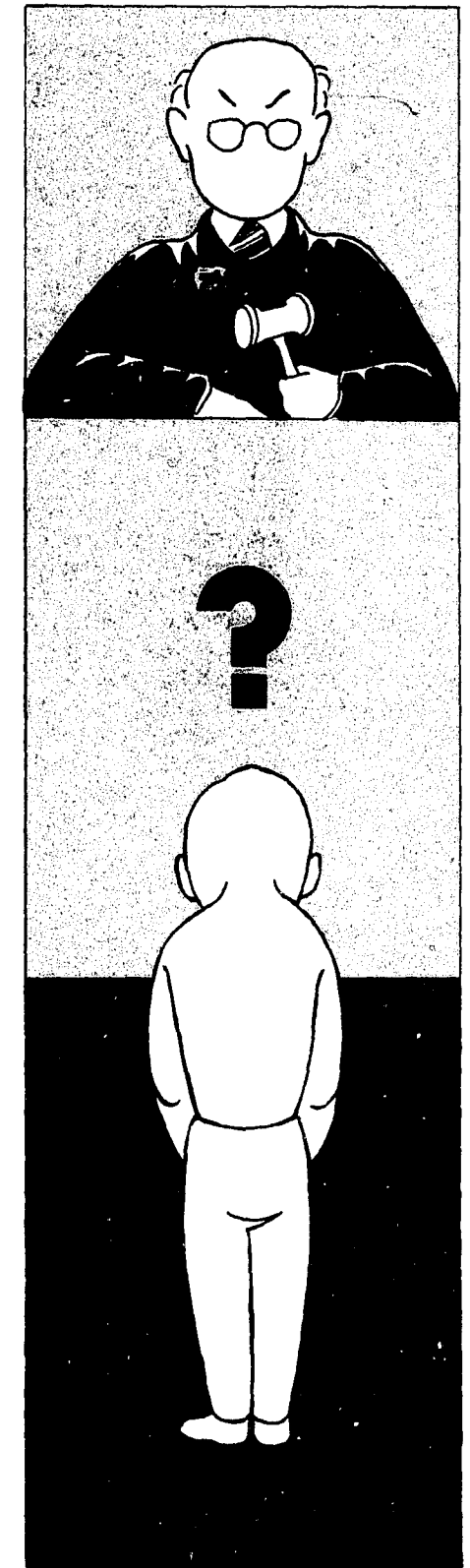
Findings from the cross-sectional study indicated that learning disabilities and delinquency were significantly related. The boys with LD had significantly higher overall rates of self-reported delinquent behavior. Learning-disabled youths were especially more likely than their non-learning-disabled peers to have committed violent offenses, to have stolen property, to have used alcohol and marijuana, and to have had more discipline problems in school. The likelihood of having been arrested and adjudicated was also substantially higher for the teenagers handicapped by learning disabilities. The greater delinquency of learning-disabled teenagers could not be explained on the basis of sociodemographic characteristics or the tendency to disclose socially disapproved behaviors. The data were consistent with the school failure hypothesis, showing that boys afflicted by learning disabilities had experienced greater school failure (as indicated by more negative attitudes toward school), and that this failure in school contributed to increases in delinquent conduct.

Moreover, among boys with equally poor school attitudes, those with LD engaged in more socially troublesome activities. This result provided support for the susceptibility hypothesis, which suggests that cognitive and personality char-

acteristics associated with learning disabilities, such as lack of impulse control and irritability, contribute directly to increases in delinquency. For comparable offenses, learning-disabled youths had higher probabilities of arrest and adjudication than teenagers who did not suffer the handicap of learning disabilities. The differential rates of arrest and adjudication for the same illegal acts indicate that the cognitive and social deficiencies of learning-disabled teenagers, such as poor verbal skills and social abrasiveness, may have prevented them from contributing effectively to their defense or from receiving the same treatment accorded youths who did not suffer the negative effects of LD. Among adjudicated delinquents, however, those with LD were not more likely to receive a more severe disposition from the court.

The results of the longitudinal analyses were generally consistent with those of the cross-sectional study. There was convincing evidence that learning disabilities were associated with increases in delinquent activities and official contacts with the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, this association was not explainable on the basis of sociodemographic characteristics or the tendency to respond in socially approved ways. In contrast to the results in the cross-sectional study, learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled boys in the longitudinal sample did not differ in their attitudes toward school. Thus, the hypothesized indirect effect of LD on delinquent behavior through school failure could not be confirmed.

Learning disabilities did make a



significant direct contribution to increases over time in illegal activities, suggesting that the intellectual and personality impairments associated with LD played an important role in producing delinquent behavior. The results also indicated that the negative effects of LD in fostering delinquency were more pronounced for some subgroups than others.

Specifically, youths who were white or who came from families with higher parental education and occupational prestige experienced relatively larger increases in delinquent behavior. The probability of official contacts with the juvenile justice system for comparable offenses was higher for the learning-disabled than the non-learning-disabled participants. The results were statistically significant for the likelihood of being arrested and almost significant for the probability of being adjudicated. Whether these differences were due to the cognitive deficiencies of the learning-disabled adolescents or to the negative reactions of law enforcement and juvenile justice personnel to teenagers with LD, or to both of these factors, could not be ascertained.

The probability of confinement to a youth correctional institution did not differ significantly for learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled boys. Thus, as was found in the cross-sectional study, learning-disabled boys were not at greater risk for severe dispositions following ad-

THE AUTHOR

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The results [of the studies] clearly demonstrate the need for special training programs to help police, probation officers, attorneys, and judges to understand the problems of learning-disabled offenders and how to deal with them effectively.

judication for comparable offenses.

Results of the cross-sectional and longitudinal studies carry important implications for the formulation of public policy and the design of future research. Both studies furnish evidence of a significant relationship between learning disabilities and self-reported and official delinquency. The findings imply that special preventive and rehabilitative services should be made available to children and youth handicapped by LD. Since learning-disabled teenagers have a greater likelihood of arrest and adjudication for offenses comparable to those of non-learning-disabled youths, special police, intake, and court procedures may be needed to ensure that the adolescents with LD do not suffer an unfair disadvantage in juvenile justice proceedings. The results clearly demonstrate the need for special training programs to help police, probation officers, attorneys, and judges to understand the problems of learning-disabled offenders and how to deal with them effec-

tively. A number of important questions for future research are raised by the findings of the cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, e.g., do youthful offenders with LD have a greater risk of becoming career criminals?

Remediation: How Effective Is It?

The ACLD remediation program had two major goals: to improve academic achievement and to prevent or control future delinquency. Based on an academic treatment model, it provided direct instruction in the functional areas of the youth's greatest learning deficiency, e.g., expressive language, reading or arithmetic. Participants received individual instruction on a weekly basis from a trained specialist in LD. It was assumed that remedial instruction would increase learning skills and decrease academic failure, which, consequently, would reduce the likelihood of future delinquent behavior and adjudication.

The evaluation research was designed as a true experiment in which teenagers who had been officially adjudicated delinquent were randomly assigned to remediation and control conditions. Members of both remediation and control groups continued to receive whatever regular or special services were normally available to them. The instructional program was offered to the remediation group participants as a supplement to their usual programs. Before remediation began, members of the remediation and control groups were pretested in reading, arithmetic, and written language expression. They were also interviewed concerning their previous delinquent activities and attitude toward school. At the conclusion of remediation, approximately one year later, the participants were tested again and the interview was repeated. A survey of court records yielded information about the participants' official contacts with the juvenile courts. Pretest and posttest data were available for 120 learning-disabled members of the remediation group and for 110 learning-

disabled members of the control group. This sample of 230 was selected from the cross-sectional sample of 970 officially delinquent males and a sample of officially delinquent females, which had been drawn from the same juvenile courts and training schools. Approximately 90 percent of the combined sample were males. It was 45 percent white, 38 percent black, and 17 percent other minority, and had an average age of 15 years. On the average, participants received 32 hours of instruction over a six-month period. Most of the remediation was concentrated on developing skills in reading, arithmetic, and expressive language.

The results of the evaluation analyses showed that remedial instruction produced modest overall gains in scholastic achievement. In general, however, the effectiveness of remediation in improving reading, arithmetic, and expressive language skills depended upon the amount of remedial instruction received and the personal and intellectual attributes of the participants. Educational improvement was greatest for those participants who received a minimum of 55 to 60 hours of instruction.

Remediation produced larger academic gains among younger low-IQ and among older high-IQ subgroups. Participation in the remediation program had a negligible effect on school attitude. Remediation produced significant reductions in self-reported delinquent behavior and in official delinquency for various subgroups of learning-disabled delinquents in the treatment group. The subgroups were defined in terms of amount of instruction received or possession of certain personal and cognitive attributes. Typically participants had to work with the LD specialists a minimum of 40 to 50 hours before significant decreases in delinquent activities and recidivism were observed. Participation in the remediation program significantly reduced the self-reported delinquent behavior of those learning-disabled youths who

In general, however, the effectiveness of remediation in improving reading, arithmetic, and expressive language skills depended upon the amount of remedial instruction received and the personal and intellectual attributes of the participants.

had engaged in relatively less antisocial conduct prior to remediation. The official delinquency of several subgroups was reduced by participation in the program. For example, remediation was most efficacious in reducing the recidivism of black youths, of teenagers who had less history of official delinquency prior to the study, and of those adolescents whose performance IQ scores were below average.

The beneficial effects of remediation on delinquency did not appear to result from improvements in academic achievement that were produced by remedial instruction. Changes in delinquency were not significantly related to changes in academic achievement. There was a strong association between change in school attitude and delinquency change. Remediation produced negligible improvement in school attitude, however, and changes in the achievement test scores could not account for the changes in school attitude. It is suggested that the participants developed attachment

to their LD specialists during the course of remediation and that this bonding led to a reduction in delinquency.

Breaking the Link

A number of implications for policy and future research follow from these results. The fact that under certain conditions remediation did improve academic achievement and reduce delinquency implies that performance-based educational programs, which use direct instruction techniques, would help increase the educational achievement and decrease the delinquency of adolescents handicapped by learning disabilities. Therefore, this model should be integrated into the curricula of public schools, alternative educational programs, training schools, and tutorial projects which serve delinquent teenagers with LD. Special remedial services should be extended also to learning-disabled predelinquents who have not yet been officially adjudicated. In order to carry out this recommendation, a great deal of training and technical assistance will have to be offered to local juvenile justice and educational agencies. For example, information about LD assessment, curriculum materials, program management, teacher training, and inter-agency coordination will be needed. A number of important questions remain concerning possible ways to enhance the effectiveness of remediation; for example, by including a social skills training component. The present findings illustrate the need for future research and development efforts in this area.

In conclusion, this research has established that a link between learning disabilities and delinquency exists and has provided some information about how the link can be broken. Hopefully, the years ahead will witness increased efforts to prevent and control delinquency among learning-disabled children and youth and more research to acquire the additional information needed to make these efforts most effective. □

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