



An Evaluation of  
The Marion County  
Project Challenge

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STATE OF FLORIDA  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

Bureau of Community Assistance  
Criminal Justice Section

December 1994

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Linda Loomis Shelley, Secretary

Division of Housing and Community Development  
Bureau of Community Assistance

Prepared by:

The Florida State University  
Institute for Health and Human Services Research

C. Aaron McNeece, Ph.D., Principal Investigator  
Anton F. Kootte, M.S.W., Research Assistant

This evaluation was prepared for the Bureau of Community Assistance, Division of Housing and Community Development, Department of Community Affairs, State of Florida in cooperation with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice.

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this report are those of the Florida State University, Institute for Health and Human Services Research, and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Florida, Bureau of Community Assistance, Division of Housing and Community Development, Department of Community Affairs, the U.S. Department of Justice Assistance or any other agency of the state or federal government.

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## MARION COUNTY

# Project Challenge

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Marion County is the fifth largest county in the state, encompassing 1,610 square miles in north-central Florida. The 1990 census indicates a rapidly growing population of approximately 194,000 people, a 59 percent increase since 1980. The county includes the city of Ocala and four smaller municipalities.

The racial composition of Marion County is primarily Caucasian (86 percent), with African-Americans making up only 13 percent of the population. The African-American population is significantly younger (median age 26.5 years) than the Caucasian population (40.7 years); approximately 35 percent of African-Americans are age 17 or younger, while only 20 percent of Caucasians fall into this age bracket.

The per capita income for Marion County in 1989 was \$11,782, 20 percent less than the state mean of \$14,698. The county's unemployment rate has been consistently higher than the state rate, and has risen from 6.9 percent in 1990 to 8.8 percent in 1992. At the time of the census, nearly 23 percent of all children under age 18 were living in single-parent households, and 23 percent of children were living below the poverty level.

### PROJECTING TREATMENT NEEDS

The Ocala office of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (DHRS) reported 2,795 juvenile delinquency referrals for 1991; an 87 percent increase since 1983. That same year, the court system referred 3,864 juveniles for substance abuse screening, and Florida Department of Law Enforcement Uniform Crime Reports indicate that 1,671 juveniles were arrested. These figures represent a substantial number of Marion County juveniles in need of preventive and rehabilitative services.

In an effort to deal with their increasing drug and crime problems, Ocala and Marion County established a blue-ribbon task force in 1989. Among their recommendations was that the city of Ocala support expanded recreational services emphasizing activities based on the Outward Bound Wilderness Programs.

An out-of-state Outward Bound program operates in Marion County's parks, but does not serve local youth. The Marion County Sheriff's Office had at one time operated an outdoor recreation program with drug confiscation monies. A park in Georgia was rented for the purpose, and deputies acted as trip guides. However, the program was discontinued with the election of a new sheriff. Thus, there was no outdoor challenge program in the area to serve local youth.

### **PROGRAM BEING EVALUATED**

Project Challenge is a wilderness adventure program for delinquent and "at risk" youth. The program is designed to improve participant's self-concept, self-esteem, self-reliance and self-control, while simultaneously requiring team work and cooperation. Participants gain outdoor skills and knowledge about nature as well. Based on the popular Outward Bound programs, Project Challenge provides a structured "stress-challenge" experience that overwhelms the youths' usual ways of dealing with peers and authority, forcing positive change.

#### **Program Design**

Outward Bound was first developed in 1941 as a means of physically and mentally "toughening up" British sailors. The movement spread to the United States where it has had many years of success. The approach was adapted for use with juveniles by youth organizations such as the Eckerd Foundation and the Florida Marine Institutes. The basic premise is that facing and meeting physical and emotional challenges in a stressful natural setting can increase feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem. Experiences of successful and responsible behavior, unencumbered by common negative social influences, has resulted in persistent attitude and behavior change for many participants.

Like other Outward Bound programs, Project Challenge was originally envisioned as a 30-day program, but the necessary funding was not available. It was shortened to a ten-day program but remained unfunded until about two years later when the director of Ocala's Recreation and Parks Department "dusted off" the plan and applied for Anti-drug Abuse Act grant funding. In order to serve an adequate number of clients to justify the grant, planners felt they had to further reduce program length to accommodate larger numbers of youth. Three days was suggested as an adequate length of time to still have an impact on participants.

The program's primary target group is delinquent youth who are court-ordered to participate as part of their community control. Instilling discipline and self-esteem should, theoretically, reduce the likelihood that these youngsters will continue their problematic behavior. Other "at-risk" children expected to benefit from participating in the program were:

- school dropouts
- children of alcohol and drug abusers
- victims of physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse
- children who have trouble getting along with others
- children with low self-esteem
- children who have experienced mental health problems, attempted suicide, or were economically disadvantaged.

Initially, the program accepted children ages 11 to 18, but experience showed that younger children were benefitting more than older teens so the age criteria was lowered, first to ages ten to 15, then eight to 13. It is the common impression that the more deeply involved an adolescent becomes with the criminal justice system the less chance he or she will turn from that path; thus the earlier a child can be helped, the better.

Project Challenge provides different levels of challenge for its participants. That is, adjudicated delinquent youth face the most difficult challenge, whereas younger children and “at risk” youth have a less stressful or demanding experience. Specifically, adjudicated youth are taken on a three day “bushwhacking” backpack trip across rough terrain, “at risk” youth take three-day canoe trips, and the youngest participants go on three one-day trips. In addition, Project Challenge supervises the labor services of juveniles who have been sentenced to community service hours. Many of these children participate in one of the trips before serving their community hours with Project Challenge.

Several state and private agencies collaborate in referring participants to Project Challenge. Once a trip date is established, an agency recruits up to ten adolescents to fill the available slots. The primary referral agencies are the Marion County branch of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (DHRS), Delinquency Case Management office, which includes the adjudicated youths; Arnette House, a temporary foster care facility; and the Rape/Spouse Abuse Shelter. Each agency serves different levels of youth in need of intervention. Project Challenge provides “adventures” tailored specifically for these divergent groups. Trips have also been provided for groups from HRS Foster Care, Marion County Community Mental Health, and the city of Ocala Truancy Intake and Supervision program.

Trips generally run Monday through Wednesday, but the school calendar is taken into consideration so that trips do not interfere with exams or other important school activities. During the school year, one day trips are run on Saturdays. Trips are not scheduled for holidays so as to avoid other people in the woods, and also to promote family holiday activities. For the same reasons, the program does not go out on Sundays.

### *Three-day Backpacking Trips*

These are the most difficult and physically challenging of the Project Challenge trips. All of the participants are referred by DHRS Delinquency Case Management (90 percent of whom are court-ordered to participate in Project Challenge as part of their sentence). Occasionally, Arnette House and other agency groups also go backpacking.

Trips are taken in three areas, the Alexander Springs Wilderness, Juniper Springs, and the Oklawaha corridor. To create an atmosphere of remoteness, the group generally does not follow clear trails. Hikers are given a compass, a map without road markings, and a one-day supply of water (water purification kits are among their supplies). With these tools (and training in how to use them), they set their course across the woods to the nearest water.

Each hiker carries all his/her own gear, including food and water, tents, tools, and utensils. They are advised on how to pack their backpack, and how to divide the group gear among them, but

they are allowed to ignore these instructions and make whatever errors they will. Those who choose to ignore the instructions soon realize the wisdom of the advice; typically, within a quarter mile, the group must stop and repack.

Each hiker is responsible for his/her own ration of water. The natural consequences of irresponsible behavior with water usually results in thirst, which serves to alter future behavior. Team work is equally important. All must share in the carrying of the communal equipment, including the cooking utensils and food. Hikers must work together to set-up their tents and to prepare fires and meals. Individuals who let the group down by discarding a heavy item or not pulling their weight in any other way are dealt with through group pressure. Gradually a sense of community responsibility is created in the participants as they learn to consider the consequences of their behavior. Other conflicts also occur, but these are usually short-lived and are closely monitored by the guides.

If a youngster misbehaves, the guides may strike out across difficult terrain. After a couple of hours of such suffering, the most rebellious youth becomes cooperative. If a youth refuses to follow, he is left behind, but invariably brings up the rear within fifteen minutes.

The guides typically do not lead the hikers. One of the participants, usually the most cocksure, takes the lead. The actual difficulty of the task of leading the group often serves to deflate their overblown self-image. Over the three days, the hikers take turns leading the group and practicing their leadership skills. The guides make a conscious effort to include everyone by giving each participant attention and positive strokes when appropriate.

In the swampy woods of Marion County, hiking is no picnic. The heat of summer (or winter cold), mosquitos, rain, and sunburn contribute to the hardship of hiking all day with a 25-pound backpack. Most of the participants are exhausted at days end, some even fall asleep at dinner.

Safety is one of the guides' main concerns, but some good-natured "rough housing" is tolerated. The children are well supervised and no unusual risks are taken. Guides have had first-aid and CPR training and water safety courses. They carry a first-aid kit and have a cellular phone and a beeper to contact the outside world if necessary. While there have been sunburns, cuts, scratches, bruises, and the occasional minor burn, no one has been seriously injured.

### *Three-day Canoe Trips*

The youth of Arnette House and JASP are the primary participants in the three-day canoe trips. While these trips are not quite as exhausting as the backpacking trips, they are still physically demanding. The youth are given simple instructions in how to paddle, unless they claim to already know how, as boys are likely to do, in which case they learn as they go along. Guides generally take the stern position in their canoes (from which one steers the canoe), but the other canoes are manned entirely by participants. Some groups get further downstream in a given day than others, depending on their actual canoeing ability - those who can navigate a canoe will take the shorter route, (i.e. inside turns, straight lines), and get to their destination faster.

Everyone must wear life vests when in the canoes, at least for the first few days. This rule is relaxed as the guides become familiar with the participants' abilities to handle their canoes. Most participants know how to swim, but the guides are always informed which ones cannot. There is often time for swimming, fishing, and occasionally for organized games at the campsite, but most of the daylight hours are spent paddling, setting up and taking down camp, and preparing meals.

Trips are taken on the Oklawaha River, Alexander Springs, and Juniper Springs. The evaluator accompanied a group on a trip down the Oklawaha, from the "ditch" of the defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal, through the locks at Moss Bluff, to the natural Oklawaha, and on to the dramatic juncture with the crystal clear Silver River, proceeding down river and getting out at Eureka. The route through the "ditch" is fairly wide, with artificially high banks of mostly pasture land, but the occasional alligator and great blue heron give hints of the river to come. The Oklawaha flows from Lake Weir, is joined by the Silver River, and empties into the St. John's River. While the "ditch" is muddy, the Silver River is crystal clear and consistently cold, rising from the Floridan aquifer at Silver Springs. Where the two rivers meet is visually striking, and the Oklawaha's water clarity is greatly improved from that point on. It winds through miles of forest, and is teeming with alligators and waterfowl. Occasionally turkeys and otters are seen, as are deer, wild hogs, raccoons, and armadillos.

### *One-day trips*

The young children who are temporary residents of the Rape/Spouse Abuse Shelter take three consecutive one-day trips. The first day is usually a hike along a nature trail, the second day a canoe trip, and the third a visit to a museum of natural history. A female staff member or a volunteer mother accompanies the group on each trip.

Project Challenge's second-year grant request added what have come to be called "reward trips," a response to the Community Council on Substance Abuse suggestion that they strengthen their client follow-up. Project staff felt this could best be accomplished through periodic outdoor activities, such as canoeing, snorkeling, or visiting out of town locations. Additional funds from the grant permitted the program to add another recreation instructor. Program alumni have taken reward trips to St. Augustine, Homassa Springs, the Natural History Museum at the University of Florida, and the Fred Bear Natural History Museum.

### *Counselor in Training*

The initial grant application called for a *Counselor in Training* program for those program participants who showed leadership potential. These youths accompanied subsequent trips as trainee counselors with the ultimate intent that they would lead future trips.

Taking along the counselor trainees naturally used up one of the available slots on a trip, thus limiting the "unduplicated numbers" of participants. This was such a concern to the Substance Abuse Council that after the first year, the Counselor in Training program was dropped in favor of serving more juveniles.

### ***Outdoor Recreation Resource Center***

Project Challenge programs work to instill in their participants a life-long appreciation of the outdoors. To further encourage this, a resource center is available to program participants and their families. The resource center provides camping equipment and advice to families who wish to make use of the area's parks and forests.

The resource center maintains an inventory of camping and canoeing equipment used during program adventures. Equipment is stored at Brick City Park, a county park operated by the city, which is also the starting place for each trip (with the exception of Arnette House trips, whose members are picked up at Arnette House). The park is centrally located and more convenient for use by Ocala residents than are the program offices, located at Sharps Ferry in Silver Springs. However, there are plans to build another building at the Sharps Ferry property to house Project Challenge's equipment in the future.

### ***Community Service Work Programs***

Project Challenge supervises the labor of juvenile delinquents who must complete community service hours as part of their sentences. Generally, these are children who have gone out on one of the three-day trips. The program has "adopted" ten miles of forest roads within Carney Island Park and hiking trails in the Cross Florida Greenways. The delinquent's labor includes cutting underbrush, trimming trees, repair of buildings, litter cleanup, and general park maintenance. Several agencies have benefitted from these labor services, including the City of Ocala Parks and Recreation Department, Marion County Parks and Recreation Department, the U.S. Forest Service, Silver River Museum, Tusawilla Youth Center, and the state Office of Greenways Management (formerly the Florida Barge Canal Authority). The continued interaction between program staff and participants also helps reinforce the lessons learned during the wilderness experiences.

### ***Program Management***

Project Challenge is coordinated through the Marion County Community Council Against Substance Abuse. The 21-member council includes representatives of the county commission and administration, Ocala City Council, Belleview City Commission, Marion County School Board, and school administration. This council is responsible for advising the county commission, city council, and school board on substance abuse prevention and treatment policy.

The program's first year budget of \$88,634 provided for an outdoor recreation supervisor, an outdoor recreation instructor, a part-time clerk, and a part-time instructor. Matching funds were provided by the city of Ocala, Marion County, and the school board. Capital outlays were for the purchase of a van, radios, office furniture, a computer, backpacks, tents, eight canoes, a canoe trailer, and other camping equipment. In April of 1991, an additional \$16,592 was requested and approved for the purchase of a second van. In November 1992, the city of Belleview allocated an additional \$25,650 to Project Challenge when they were unable to proceed with another program. These funds were used to hire a second recreation instructor. Thus, the program's total budget increased from \$88,634 to \$102,599 between 1991 and 1993.

Initially, the program was managed under the auspices of Ocala's Department of Recreation and Parks Department. But several city council members felt it was inappropriate for the city to pay for a county service, so in March 1993, its third year, the program was transferred to the Marion County Recreation and Parks Department. The switch came at an opportune time for the county since Carney Island Conservation and Recreation Area was opening soon, and a ranger was needed to oversee it. By accepting Project Challenge and making the project coordinator Carney Island's ranger, Marion County Recreation and Parks was actually able to reduce its budget. Now half of the project coordinator's position is funded by Carney Island and half by Project Challenge. As a result Project Challenge's budget was reduced to \$84,000, less than its original allocation.

The project director, or coordinator, was hired in February 1991, and served as a guide on the early trips. The director acts as liaison to the courts, the school system, various referring agencies, and the Substance Abuse Council. He guides the program and serves as an instructor for the Outdoor Recreation Resource Center. The present outdoor recreation supervisor was hired in July 1991, and he now manages the program's daily operations, serves as a trip guide, and supervises the contract guides.

During the program's second year, a full-time guide was hired. But program management felt that due to the nature of the work (long hours during trips and little to do in between), it was not possible to economically utilize the guide's time. They now employ contract guides who are paid per trip. Presently, there are three contract guides in addition to the supervisor who regularly make the trips.

#### **Interorganizational Coordination**

Project Challenge trips are an excused absence from school. Project staff notify schools in advance of a student's planned participation and following the trip, students are given notes indicating their actual participation in the group as their official excuse. Marion County schools had considered making referrals to Project Challenge, but for reasons of potential liability decided to refrain from direct referrals.

Many representatives of the referring agencies, including a circuit court judge, have participated in trips and thus have first hand knowledge of the experience Project Challenge provides for their clients. All informants and referring agencies uniformly praise the program and believed they had seen positive effects upon their clients. An indication of the esteem that Arnette House holds for the program is that one of the guides is employed there part time.

Referral criteria are clearly understood by the referring agencies. Specifically, youth ages eight to 13, involved with the criminal justice system, or considered to be at risk for such involvement. Typical problems include low self-esteem and difficulty getting along with others. The youth should be physically fit enough to participate safely, but special arrangements have been made to accommodate youth with medical problems such as diabetes and asthma. Any medications are kept and controlled by the guides. Violent offenders, including sex offenders, have made the trip, but children who present a danger to themselves or others are excluded. Guides are made aware of any sex offenders within the group.

Both Arnette House and the Rape/Spouse Abuse Shelter always send one of their staff on trips with their clients. This is particularly helpful when the groups include females; all Project Challenge staff, except office staff, are male. The Rape/Spouse Abuse groups include both males and females and often younger children than are allowed on the overnight trips (they therefore are taken on day trips instead). While all delinquency case management referrals are male (they don't get enough female referrals to form a group), every other Arnette House trip is a female group. From participants' descriptions, it appears that the female groups' canoe trip experience is very similar to that of the males.

## **PROGRAM OBJECTIVES & PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

In their first grant application, Project Challenge set itself the goals of improving participant's self-esteem, improving their "academic achievement in the physical sciences," developing leadership skills, and establishing "a life long appreciation of the outdoors." The means to achieve each of these ends are the challenge adventures described earlier, and the Counselor-in-Training program to enhance leadership skills. In the second year, a fifth objective was added, "reduce[ing] future deviant behavior." Performance measures and percentages of change are specified for each of these goals.

Once the group is settled down in the van and on their way to the trip location, they are given two paper and pencil pre-tests (described below). On the way home, they complete two post-tests. The post-tests are exact duplicates of the pre-tests given two and a half days (52 hours) earlier. The guides file a simple trip report which includes names of trip participants, trip location, times of stopping and starting, etc. They also complete an evaluation of each participant.

### **Self-esteem**

The "How I See Myself" (HISM) scale is used to measure self-esteem. Improvement is demonstrated by a change in scores as measured by a standardized scale. The HISM is an assessment of self-concept and is intended for the experimental evaluation of groups. It is a self-report measure in which respondents are asked to rate themselves on a five-point Likert scale. For example, "I do not like to try new things" and "I do like to try new things"; "I rarely get mad" and "I get mad easily and explode."

The elementary-level test, known as the "How I Feel About Myself" scale, presents ten pairs of statements that respondents answer with yes or no. The first ten statements are negative, the second ten are the opposite (e.g., 1. Are you easily hurt by criticism?, 11. Do you accept criticism easily?; 9. Are you too modest about personal success?, 19. Do you give yourself credit when credit is due?). The secondary form consists of 42 pairs of statements. It includes subscales for relationship with teacher-school, physical appearance, autonomy, academic adequacy, attitudes toward same gender fellow students, attitude toward opposite gender, and interpersonal adequacy. To avoid a response set, certain items on the scale must be reverse scored, that is, some negative statements are scored high and some are scored low. The lower the score, the lower the self concept.

According to the "Mental Measurements Yearbook" (1978), there are no subscale reliability figures available for the elementary form, but the secondary level form has published means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for each subscale. With published total score reliability of .72 to .89, HISM's reliability is quite high.

It is important to note that the HISM is a measure of self-concept, not of self-esteem. Self-esteem is, however, certainly a function of self-concept and so this choice of measure is not entirely unreasonable. Technically, however, separate validity studies for this specific population are recommended.

### ***Outdoor Knowledge & Skills***

While the grant application speaks of improving participant's "achievement in the physical sciences," knowledge of the outdoors and the natural environment more aptly describes the intent. An "Outdoor Education Questionnaire" developed by program staff is used in a pre- and post-manner to measure such knowledge. The program's fourth objective of establishing "a lifelong appreciation of the outdoors" is also measured with this questionnaire, which consists of 28 questions about the natural world, including items about types of trees, types of snakes, what to do for snake bite, Florida's state tree, state bird, and state flower. Understanding of the following terms is tested; ecology, organic, inorganic, conservation, herbivore, omnivore, carnivore, hemotoxin, neurotoxin, and biodegradable. Guides define these concepts and give examples of them throughout the trip. They will "quiz" the youths from time to time during a trip. However, there is no formal presentation making it doubtful that all participants receive the same amount of exposure to the concepts.

### ***Instructor Evaluations of Participants***

In addition to the above measures, participants are individually rated by one of the guides. A "Participant Evaluation" form, developed by program staff, uses a five-point Likert scale to rate each child on the following ten items (with their descriptive subtitles):

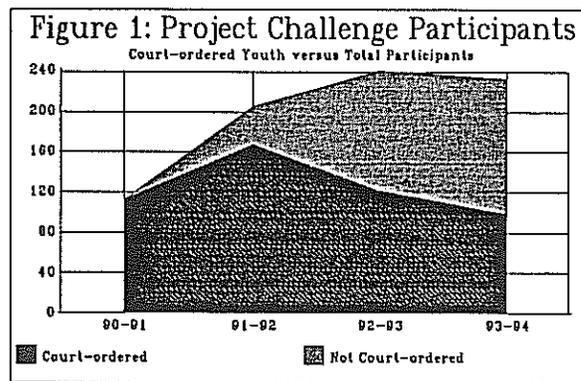
- interpersonal adequacy (determination & self-confidence)
- knowledge of physical sciences
- leadership skills & abilities (exhibits positive role model characteristics)
- outdoor skills & abilities (attempts to learn new skills or improve upon previous knowledge)
- adult role model (acceptance/better understanding of outdoor instructor)
- physical self (satisfaction with body build & performance)
- physical confidence & awareness (aware of posture & appearance)
- emotional stability (views problems as more solvable)
- peer relations (more compatible with own age group)
- autonomy (not easily influenced by others or susceptible to negative influence).

Space is allowed for comments after each item. Research has shown that instructor evaluations correlate highly with participant's success in the program and with long-term improvements or failure to improve. That is, highly-rated participants are less likely to revert to earlier behavior patterns while low-rated participants demonstrate little, if any behavior change.

## OUTPUTS

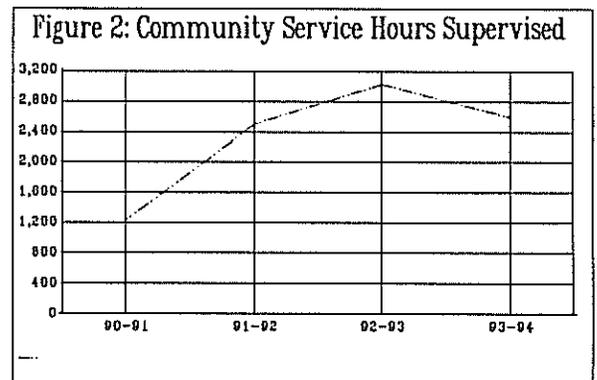
Following the first trip in April 1991, Project Challenge completed ten three-day trips with 112 participants within the next six months. Largely due to its late start, the program fell short of its target of 325 participants. Trips were run at the same pace during the second year resulting in 28 trips with 205 participants. Project staff realized that they needed to lower their target for total clients served, but could not count on ten youth per trip. In 1993, additional funds allowed them to raise the target up to 300 (33 trips), but only 240 were actually served. During the final year, 29 trips served 232 participants and exceeded the goal of 225 set for that year. Thus, over the life of the project, there have been 100 three-day trips serving 789 youths, including 498 referred by Delinquency Case Management.

All of the first-year participants were referred by Delinquency Case Management, but as shown in Figure 1, the percentage of adjudicated participants decreased steadily due to deliberate changes in referral criteria. That is, choosing to serve younger youth who had less involvement



with crime. Despite the reduced number of placements from Delinquency Case Management, the DHRS counselors are satisfied with the number of their clients served, and all youth court-ordered to the program are served. In 1994, Delinquency Case Management referrals accounted for 42 percent of all participants. Since there are now three primary agencies given trips to fill (DHRS, Arnette House, Rape/Spouse Abuse Shelter), approximately two-thirds of the referrals are expected to be voluntary.

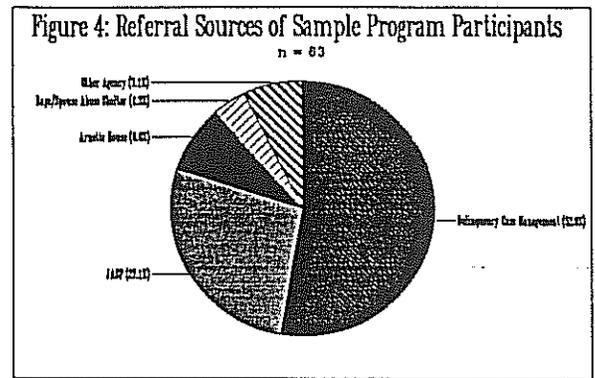
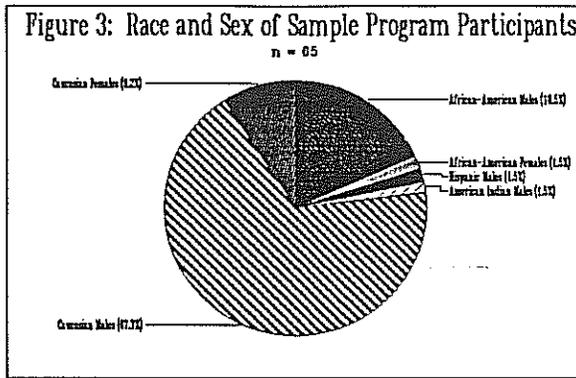
While no specific goals were set for supervising community service hours, Project Challenge supervised nearly 10,000 hours over the first four years (see Figure 2).



### Sample Data

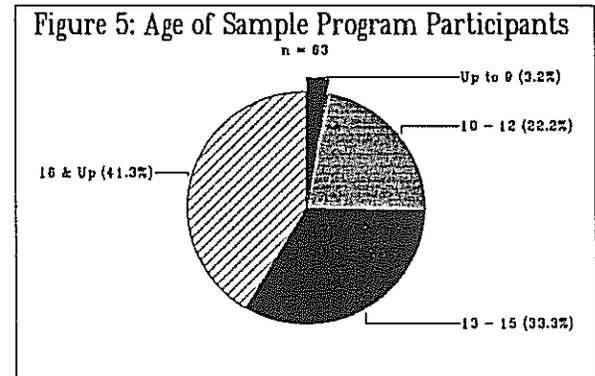
A systematic sample (every tenth case, starting with a random number) was drawn from program files. Total sample size was 65, including 12 African-American males and one African-

American female, one Hispanic male, one Native American male, and six Caucasian females. As shown in Figure 3, 20 percent of the sample were African-American, 10 percent were female, another 3 percent were minority, and nearly 68 percent were Caucasian males. These figures are consistent with local population statistics, except that African-American male representation is slightly higher than their percentage in the general population. In all likelihood, this higher percentage is consistent with the African-American proportion of juvenile court cases.



As seen in Figure 4, 59 percent of our sample had been referred by Delinquency Case Management, 19 percent by JASP, 9.5 percent by Arnette House, 5 percent from the Rape/Spouse Abuse Shelter (the most recent of regular referral sources), and 7.9 percent from other agencies. Over the four years of the program's existence, 17 percent of our sample went on canoe trips and 73 percent took the backpacking trip. More recent figures should more closely reflect the three primary referral agencies, that is, each would represent approximately a third of cases as each has a third of the trips.

As seen in Figure 5, over 22 percent of the sample were ten to 12 years of age, 33.3 percent were 13 to 15, and 41.3 percent were 16 or older. Again, had our sample consisted only of recent program participants the percentages of lower age groups would be greater.



Instructor ratings of the individuals in our sample ranged from a low of 14 to a high of 45 on a 50-point scale. The mean rating was 31.67. Since these ratings reflect the instructor's judgment of a participant's maturity, it is not surprising that the older youths (16 and up) were rated higher (mean 35.42) than the ten to 12 year olds (mean 28.38) and 13 to 15 year olds (mean 29.44). There were no racial differences in ratings. The mean for white males was 31.56 (n=39) and that of black males was 31.77 (n=9).

## OUTCOMES

### Psychological and Interpersonal Change

Informants who had knowledge of the youths before and after their participation in Project Challenge reported a number of improvements in their clients. They noted "a sense of pride," "a feeling of accomplishment," and having "met a challenge" and survived. Having been allowed to make mistakes, participants "learn to consider the consequences of their behavior." They become "aware of alternative solutions" or "choices," other means to a given end besides violence and

intimidation. This “increased decision making ability,” coupled with “improved self-esteem” leads to a “greater ability to resist peer pressure.” Equally important, the necessity for team work during the trips teaches participants to “cooperate,” to develop “a sense of trust” and “commitment to each other.” They become “more open,” “more empathetic” toward each other, and more “willing to work together.” The younger children are usually “excited to tell about their experiences.” As a result, Project Challenge has a good reputation among the children as demonstrated by the fact that some are now asking for referral to the program.

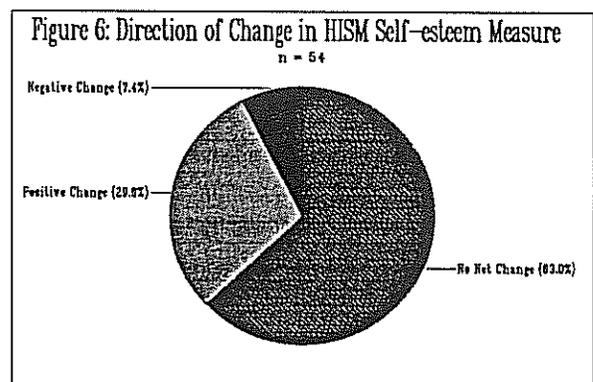
The evaluator was able to see changes in some of the boys during the canoe trip he accompanied. For example, the first day started with some not-so-friendly competition between two of the canoes, such as pushing each other into the reeds along the bank to prevent passing. But by the second day, the boys from one canoe, through quick thinking and acting, rescued the other canoe from a probable collision with a hornets’ nest. There were minor conflicts throughout the trip, even a brief fist-fight between two boys the first night, but by trips end, everyone was working well together.

At the end of the trip, the evaluator asked several of the boys what they had gotten out of the trip besides sunburn and sore muscles. While most said they’d learned how to canoe and had seen more gators than they ever had before, two spontaneously volunteered that they felt more self-confidence as a result of the trip. Another boy had been on two of the previous back-packing trips (as a result of having been an Arnette House resident twice previously), and he was able to reflect on changes within himself since the first trip. He said he felt more confident in himself, more comfortable around people, and that he got along with others better. The guides also commented on how much more leadership the boy now shows.

### Results of HISM Self-esteem Measure

The HISM scale measures various aspects of self-concept, a measure that can go up and down independently. It is typical for Project Challenge’s participants to change from pre-test to post-test both positively and negatively on the various items. The simplest way to score the tests, therefore, is to count the number of items which changed positively against those which changed negatively.

HISM scores were available on 54 participants from our sample. As seen in Figure 6, 63 percent showed no net change, 29.6 percent changed positively, and 7.4 percent changed negatively. A net gain of 22 percent improvement in self-concept falls far short of the program goal of 85 percent. However, since self-concept and self-esteem are thought to be fairly stable, that is, not casually altered, a change in 22 percent in less than three days is notable.



It is difficult to interpret the negative changes. They may be due to a more accurate or honest completion of the questionnaire after the trip. Admittedly, many of the youth do not take the initial questionnaires (and physical knowledge test) seriously. But it is also possible that over-inflated aspects of their self-opinion have changed. For example, a bully may no longer think as highly of himself. Still, it is possible that disappointing or frustrating experiences, as opposed to the desired experience of overcoming challenge, could be detrimental to self-esteem and self-concept.

Still, we have no way of knowing whether any of these changes, positive or negative, are lasting. Even if we could measure degree of improvement, we would still not know whether large or small changes were more durable, nor whether a small change has behavioral consequences. All of this makes the utility of the self-esteem questionnaire as a measure of program success questionable.

### **Academic Achievement**

One of Project Challenge's stated goals was to "improve academic achievement in the physical sciences of 65 percent of the participants by 65 percent" as measured by their scores on the outdoor education questionnaire. Our sample results do not remotely approach this goal. Only 18 percent of the sample participants for whom we had a pre- and post-test score (n=50) improved their score by 65 percent or more. Another 26 percent improved by 50 percent or more. Ten percent of cases improved from 100 to 200 percent, yet 12 percent worsened, while 14 percent changed by less than 10 percent. Scores ranged from 8 to 26 on the pre-test and from 9 to 28 on the post-test. Differences from pre- to post-test ranged from -7 to +16. There were no significant differences between racial or age groups. The average improvement from pre-test to post-test was 3.78 points, or 13.5 percent of the points available.

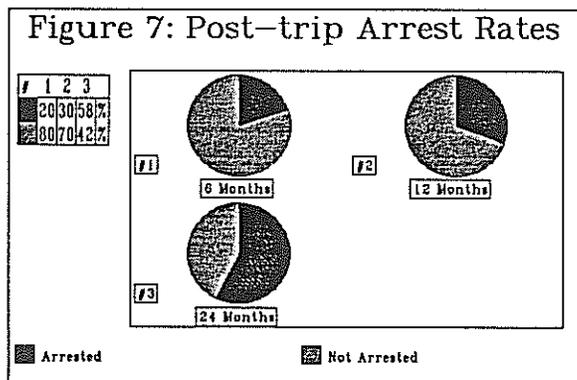
Lifelong appreciation of the outdoors was also to be assessed by the outdoor education questionnaire. Clearly a "lifelong" appreciation cannot be measured by a one-time measure, nor can "appreciation" be measured by a test of knowledge. Establishing a lifelong appreciation of the outdoors may very well be a program outcome, but it is not easily measurable due to the time and cost factors which such follow-up would entail. A more appropriate goal would be to instill "some" appreciation for the outdoors.

Use of the Recreation Resource Center could, however, serve as an indicator of participants' continued interest in the outdoors. Unfortunately, not a single alumni has made use of the Center's services. This outcome should not be terribly surprising given the program's clientele, namely children who are largely from single-parent homes and otherwise disadvantaged. It is unlikely that these families would be able to take their children on camping and fishing trips due to their socioeconomic circumstances. In fact, according to one informant, one of the program's strengths is that it offers the children of single parent families the opportunity to do things they wouldn't ordinarily be exposed to. Obviously, the Center's loan of equipment would make such trips less expensive, but other factors (time, stress, etc.) prevent many families from taking advantage of it. And while the program may have instilled an interest in the outdoors in the participant, it is very unlikely to have that effect upon the child's parent who did not accompany the child on the trip.

## Recidivism

The program's fifth goal, reducing recidivism, is regarded as an appropriate measure of program success by all referring agencies and community informants. The intent was to follow participants through the schools at three- and six- month intervals but predictably, the schools would not cooperate with such a followup.

A different sort of followup was arranged with DHRS. In February 1992 and again in January 1993, DHRS compared post-trip offense records of 20 Project Challenge participants with 20 non-participants. Non-participants were matched demographically with the Challenge group to serve as a quasi-control group. Comparison was made with earlier time periods because ethically participation can not be withheld from present offenders just to serve as a control group. The first comparison looked at the number of offenses charged to the Challenge group from April 1991 to December 1991 and the control group from April 1989 to December 1989. The Challenge group had a total of 15 referrals and the control group had 44, a 66 percent difference. The 1993 comparison contrasted post-trip records (January 1992 to December 1992) for 20 different Challenge participants with a control group's records (January 1990 to December 1990). The Challenge group had 12 offenses while the control group had 23, a reduction of 48 percent.



FDLE adult and DHRS juvenile records of our sample were also checked. Of the 11 youths who had turned 18 since participation, only two had been rearrested. No juvenile record was found for six of the sample clients. As shown in Figure 7, only 20 percent of all sample participants were arrested within six months of their trip. The post-trip arrest rate rose to 30 percent within the first year and to 58 percent within two years. This finding is consistent with a local circuit judge's

estimates that less than half of those he has sent to the program return to his courtroom with new offenses.

Forty-seven participants (72.3 percent) had been arrested prior to their referral to Project Challenge, none on drug charges. But two of the youths with prior arrests were arrested on drug charges within two years after their trip. The rearrest rates for participants with prior records were almost identical to the rates for the group as a whole. At 6-, 12-, and 24-month follow-up, 22, 30, and 57 percent were rearrested, respectively. Notably, only 25 percent of the adjudicated youth referred by Delinquency Case Management were rearrested within two years of their trip.

Instructor ratings for participants with prior arrests (31.74) was not significantly different from the ratings of those without prior arrests (31.25). However, ratings for participants who were not arrested within two years (36.84) was significantly higher than that of those who had been arrested (31.0). Yet the difference between means of 5.59 only amounts to 11.8 percent of the total possible points. Therefore, while statistically significant, the difference is not practically different enough to make these ratings a useful indicator of future behavior.

## ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Issue: Little improvement on physical knowledge test.**

The majority of participants showed little improvement on their post-test scores, yet some improved by 100 to 200 percent. While differences arise due to the individual's previous education, learning skills, and intelligence, disparities in this case are more than likely due to widely varied exposure to the material. There was essentially no formal instruction during the canoe trip the evaluator accompanied. There was repeated, brief, informal presentations of the information, but due to the frequent separation of the canoes, individual exposure to the presentation was haphazard. If the knowledge tested is considered important for the participants to acquire, then efforts should be made to impart it equitably among the group members.

Without adequate instruction, a child's continued ignorance about a subject can be frustrating and interpreted by the child as yet another indication of his or her failure. That is, taking a test when unfamiliar with the content area can result in self-deprecating judgments which tend to lower self-esteem. Conversely, having learned the material and proving it tends to raise self-esteem.

### **Recommendation: More structure and regularity in instruction**

Presentation of the content the test is based upon should occur formally in addition to the informal presentations. This information could be discussed on the way to the adventure site, around the campfire after dinner, or in the mornings or afternoons during meal breaks or rest periods. This would ensure that all group members were equally exposed to the material. Once this is done, pre-post testing will more accurately reflect an individual's learning.

### **Issue: Lack of "letter of agreement" with referring agencies.**

While no interagency problems came to light during our evaluation, it nevertheless is considered wise to formalize interagency relationships when clients are concerned.

### **Recommendation: Formal letter of agreement between agencies.**

This document should outline referral criteria, specify services to be provided by Project Challenge, regulate formats and schedules of reports to be given to referral sources, document services to be provided by referral source (such as additional guides or chaperons), and formalize procedures for sharing information, maintaining confidentiality, and purchasing liability and other insurance.

### **Issue: What to do if lost or separated from group?**

Again, while there has been no significant problems of this nature, the potential exists. Canoes and hikers do get separated from each other and from the guides.

### **Recommendation: Instruction on what to do if lost or separated.**

Instructions should be given at the start of each trip and then repeated periodically. Whether instructions are to stay put or continue forward, knowing what to do will reduce a child's anxiety if caught in this situation. Knowing what the child is expected to do will also make recovering that child much easier and more likely.

**Issue: Inadequacy of self-esteem test as a program measure**

As discussed, the HISM testings indicated relatively small improvements in self-esteem, and there is no mechanism for establishing whether those changes are lasting. On the other hand, change in behavior is the ultimate goal of the program. Reduced recidivism, generated from DHRS's CIS database, is a more appropriate measure of program success.

**Recommendation: Discontinue use of HISM**

Continue pre- and post-testing for physical knowledge, as this helps give structure and seriousness to the trip. Discontinue HISM as it provides little useful information.

**Other Suggestions**

Community informants and referral agencies' suggestions for improving the program amount to asking for more of the same. Several suggested that trips be longer and that more contact be maintained with the youth following the trips. Offering more trips, adding family trips, and once again allowing older youths on trips were also suggested. The Arnette House would like to send all of their residents on a Project Challenge trip, but are scheduled for only one trip per month. Since the average length of stay for their residents is 12 days, there is little possibility that all of their clients can participate.

Supplementing adult supervision with volunteer guides, such as police officers, teachers, and counselors, could yield several benefits. The interaction between participants and volunteer guides could improve the youths' attitudes toward these individuals and similar authorities in the community. In addition these guides would likely become supporters of the program and would encourage others to become involved.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Project Challenge provides safe, challenging outdoor adventures that benefit participants in numerous ways. While the psychological benefits are difficult to quantify, the benefit to the community is clear--reduced number of juvenile offenses and cost savings to the justice system. Specifically, Project Challenge significantly reduced the reoffense rates of participants compared to other groups and participants' own prior behavior. The Ocala Department of Recreation and Parks calculated the local cost of processing a youth through adjudication, not including incarceration, probation, etc. Costs, including salaries of arresting officer, DHRS intake, and clerk of court plus court-time came to \$15,000 per child. Project Challenge, with a budget of \$84,000, is obviously cost effective. Project Challenge provides a valuable service to the community and is worthy of continuation.

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