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Evaluating G.R.E.A.T.:
A School-Based Gang Prevention Program

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Few rigorous evaluations have been conducted on gang prevention programs. But one, a careful 5-year longitudinal evaluation, shows that Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) has modest positive effects on adolescents' attitudes and delinquency risk factors but no effects on their involvement in gangs and actual delinquent behaviors. (For insight on the evaluation, see "A Tale of Two Studies.")

What is G.R.E.A.T.?

G.R.E.A.T. differs from most efforts to reduce gang problems. Typical programs are directed at active gang members, and most target youths who are at risk for joining gangs. The G.R.E.A.T. program, in contrast, is presented to entire classrooms without attempting to predict which students are most likely to become involved with a gang.

The G.R.E.A.T. program is aimed at middle school students and seeks to—

- Reduce their involvement in gangs and delinquent behavior.
- Teach them consequences of gang involvement.
- Help them develop positive relations with law enforcement.

These three objectives are addressed through a 9-hour curriculum taught in schools by uniformed law enforcement officers. Students are taught to set positive goals, resist negative pressures, resolve conflicts, and understand how gangs impact the quality of their lives.

Does G.R.E.A.T. work?

G.R.E.A.T. has achieved modest positive results. The evaluation survey was first administered to youths when they were in 7th grade and readministered annually through 11th grade. Results show that G.R.E.A.T. was able to successfully change several risk factors (e.g., peer group associations and attitudes about gangs, law



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A TALE OF TWO STUDIES

The national evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. program used two separate studies to assess its effectiveness: a 1-year cross-sectional study^a and a 5-year longitudinal,^b quasi-experimental study.^c Two years into the 5-year study, students were not exhibiting the promising returns indicated by the 1-year study.^d In response, a national evaluation team assessed and revised the program. Greater emphasis was placed on incorporating teachers into the lesson plan to enhance the reinforcement of lessons and skills learned. The new curriculum also focused more on active learning than on a didactic approach, and booster sessions were added to reinforce skills learned in prior years.^e Pilots of the new program were tested in 14 cities in 2001 prior to its implementation in 2002–2003. (At the time of this publication, the revised program curriculum has not been evaluated.)

Notes

a. A cross-sectional study is a research design in which data are collected at one point in time. In the 1-year evaluation, for example, eighth-grade students answered questions during the spring of 1995.

b. A longitudinal study is one in which data are collected at multiple times. In this study, the same students were asked questions when they were in 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. This process allows both individual and group changes to be examined over time.

c. Quasi-experimental studies are conducted when comparison groups (i.e., the treatment group and control group) cannot be created through random assignment. Since students from classrooms in this study could not be assigned randomly in all situations, another form of matching was used to create comparison groups at some of the schools.

d. One year after completing the G.R.E.A.T. course, participants in the cross-sectional study reported more positive attitudes (e.g., more committed to school) and behaviors (e.g., more communication with parents) than nonparticipants. Results also showed that G.R.E.A.T. participants had lower rates of self-reported delinquency and less involvement in high-risk factors associated with gang membership. See Esbensen, Finn-Aage, and D. Wayne Osgood, *National Evaluation of G.R.E.A.T.*, Research in Brief, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1997, NCJ 167264.

e. Esbensen, Finn-Aage, Adrienne Freng, Terrance J. Taylor, Dana Peterson, and D. Wayne Osgood, "National Evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) Program," in *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research*, Winifred L. Reed and Scott H. Decker, eds., Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2002: 139–167, NCJ 190351.

enforcement, and risk-seeking behaviors) associated with delinquency and gang membership. These changes resulted from G.R.E.A.T.'s focus on and encouragement of prosocial activities that lead youths away from involvement with delinquent peers and toward involvement with peers who exhibit more socially acceptable behavior.

In doing so, G.R.E.A.T. has met two of the three program objectives: more favorable attitudes from students toward the police and greater awareness of the consequences of gang involvement as indicated by more negative attitudes from students about gangs. Despite the success in addressing risk factors, the third objective—reducing gang membership and delinquent behavior—was not met.

Several significant results emerged in program participants when they were compared with nonparticipants during the last annual followup survey, 4 years after program delivery:

- 7-percent lower levels of victimization.
- 5-percent difference in negative views about gangs.

INTERPRETING RESULTS: THE COMPLEXITY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

Even after 12 years of schooling, many students enter college with inadequate math and/or writing skills. If such exposure fails to produce desired outcomes, how can the effectiveness of smaller dosage programs, such as G.R.E.A.T., be measured?

Assessing youth intervention programs is not a simple task, especially when considering the number of factors that affect the lives of youths. Yet, a carefully designed outcome evaluation, such as the one used in the G.R.E.A.T. study, can detect program impact. The impact measured, however, may be modest, as is the case in this study.

- 5-percent difference in favorable attitudes toward the police.
- 5-percent difference in engaging in risk-seeking behaviors.
- 4-percent difference in association with peers involved in prosocial activities.

When viewed in the context of a risk-focused delinquency prevention approach, these results suggest that future negative behaviors are preventable. The risk-focused prevention approach is based on extensive research that has identified risk factors for crime and violence that occur among individuals, families, and peer groups and in communities and schools.

Prevention strategies can then be developed that focus on the common risk factors. The results also are consistent with research on protective factors that buffer children from becoming delinquent and contribute to healthy behaviors.¹ (For additional discussion of the results, see “Interpreting Results: The Complexity of Program Evaluation.”)

Positive perceptions of G.R.E.A.T.

Parent and educator surveys revealed positive attitudes toward G.R.E.A.T. The majority of parents agreed that uniformed officers belong in schools and make good instructors. Most educators agreed that the curriculum is appropriate for the students’ age and that it addresses the problems facing middle school students. The instructing officers expressed overwhelming support for the program, stating that it improved their relationships with the children, the school, and the community as a whole.

What’s the bottom line?

The G.R.E.A.T. program provides some demonstrable benefits: It educates youths

on the consequences of gang involvement, and they develop favorable attitudes toward the police. These are important goals. However, the program did not reduce gang membership or future delinquent behavior. Such programs should be implemented based on a realistic assessment of what they can accomplish. Although G.R.E.A.T. produced educational benefits and improved police relations for a relatively small investment, this 9-hour G.R.E.A.T. program alone will not keep children out of gangs or reduce delinquent behavior. Other strategies should be used to meet those goals. Additional information on such strategies can be found at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/search/topiclist.asp>.

Note

1. See Wilson, John J., and James C. Howell, *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Offenders*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1993, NCJ 143453; and Elliott, Delbert, Norma J. Hatot, and Paul Sirovatka, eds., *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON G.R.E.A.T.:

Contact the program office at 800-743-7070.

Consult the program Web site at <http://www.atf.gov/great/index.htm>.

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