

**THE FUTURE OF DIVERSION SERVICES FOR "AT-RISK" YOUTH  
AND THEIR FAMILIES**

JOURNAL ARTICLE

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**This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.**

**Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.**

**Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.**

**The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).**

The twentieth century has seen a wide swing in the pendulum of American society's attitude towards children and in particular to those in contact with the juvenile justice system. In the early part of this century it was not uncommon to have labor sweat shops staffed with children. These deplorable work standards lead to the enactment of many laws to protect children from unsafe work and living conditions. In response to those harsh surroundings all of the states have enacted laws to protect children from physical as well as sexual abuse. In the mid part of the century, laws and court decisions were also made to protect children from a potentially abusive criminal justice system. These protections include the right to have a separate court system from adult offenders.

Youthful offenders also enjoy a privilege in law that encourages a system designed to divert them from entering "the system." These diversion programs are designed to address the risk factors that can cause a juvenile to commit crimes as well as hopefully directing them to a more appropriate behavior pattern so that criminal activity is not their routine performance. In most areas throughout the State, diversion plans are often directed at counseling the at-risk youth and their families. These services can be expensive both financially as well as having time and labor impacts.

The challenge for the future of the law enforcement community is to continue to seek creative ways to provide diversion services to at-risk youth and their families. This challenge can be even more acute in jurisdictions with smaller communities and limited resources. The Sonoma Police Department is actively taking steps to develop a creative and cost effective method to address the issues of youthful at-risk offenders. This work is intended to establish partnerships within the community to address the needs of these families.

In 1995, bookings and retention of subjects at the Sonoma County Juvenile Detention Hall reached an all time high. There was an average population of 130 juveniles in a facility that was designed to hold 100. As a result of this overcrowded condition, an

advisory board made specific recommendations to address this problem. Included in those recommendations was the direction to form community based systems that would be structured within the geographic boundaries of each school district. These local groups would formulate strategies and develop collaborative efforts at the community level to help prevent or reduce the number of children entering the dependency and juvenile justice systems.

As part of the collaborative effort it was necessary to find willing partners and providers of these services for at-risk families. This process actually was made rather easy for us in that we were fortunate to have an active, yet un-tapped by Law Enforcement, resource of mental health providers in the Sonoma Valley.

Our department met with local service providers that were willing to donate, or work on a low sliding scale, their talents with various projects. Out of this pool of providers has come the following diversion specialty groups:

Parenting Skills

Blended and Divorced Family

Grandparents Parenting Again

Fathers as Single Parents/Father and Son Relationships

Self Esteem Groups For Young Women

Drug/Alcohol Experimental Use and Abuse

Anger Management

Theft Awareness

Stress Reduction

Mentoring Programs

Organized meetings and tours of the State Prison at San Quentin

These specialty groups will provide additional diversion options for the Sonoma Valley as well as provide more directive and specific treatments for specific offenders.

Although these services are just now being offered in our community, there is a methodology that can be used for other communities to determine the services that will be needed to meet needs in the future.

The ideas for future services were generated from a futures oriented process known as the Nominal Group Technique or NGT. In this process, informed community leaders provide their input and direction to future Issues and Events as related to providing service to at-risk families. This group process helped to clarify the direction and possible future for service providing. The participants in this process included mental health providers, law enforcement officers, youth community organizers, and representatives from the Hispanic community.

This group specifically examined the trends and issues as they relate to the types of services that might be provided to individuals and families that are at-risk for entering the juvenile justice system. The group also identified the specific trends that they felt would have the greatest impact on the provided services and how they would be provided. This group also firmly believes that the process of providing these services is a good thing for the community. They generally were optimistic about the future and stated the risks of failure by any one service provider would likely be balanced with the addition of another.

The NGT process identified the following key Trends:

- Latino Involvement in the Community

The Latino Community would become more vocal and participatory in the community. Services would need to be tailored more for this group. There is a current scarcity of resources for the Latino Community in Sonoma. The greatest concern is in finding service providers that are fluent in Spanish. Providers that are fluent in Spanish already work to their capacity.

- School Responsiveness

The schools would take on a more active role and be more responsive to the needs of parents, students and teachers. This response would come from a stronger demand made by the public for more accountability on the part of the school.

- Violent Behavior

The increased perception and/or reality of juveniles committing more acts of serious violence. This would include assaults with weapons or other assaultive behavior resulting in serious injury or death.

- Shift from Government to Private Service Providers

A decline in government provided services that would create a void that would need to be filled by the private sector.

- Economic Variance

The margin between the economic groups in the community would change. The impact of this trend on services is seen in the need for more government services for those who are unable to afford private suppliers.

After the identification of the trends related to service providing, our group identified specific events and their likelihood of occurrence.

The NGT process identified the following key Events:

- Daytime Curfew Ordinance

This event was seen as the creation of a city/county ordinance that would address school attendance problems. The intent of the local ordinance would allow for local intervention. Although this process is gaining momentum in some parts of California, there are organized movements that oppose its adoption. The event was identified as being significant in that it would provide a new tool for identification of those at-risk of school failure. It is hoped that early interventions can be provided to assist this group.

- Organized youth gang activity

This event was seen as a threshold event. This would not include the activity of the gang wannabe, but rather the criminal activity of an organized and structured youth gang. Although this type of activity has been identified in larger cities, the smaller Sonoma Valley has perhaps avoided this type of visible criminal inclination.

- Teenage suicide pact

This event was viewed as a corollary to the youth gang activity. But this behavior would have the anger and confusion directed inward in a pact of self destruction.

- Major Hate Crime Occurs

Although hate crimes have already occurred in our area, fortunately they do not seem to have an organized basis behind them. This event was defined as having a strong involvement by an organized group of racists.

- Major System Failure of a key service provider

This event was intended to define the failure by either negligence or financial collapse of one of the key providers in the area of service providing. Examples of the types of failure included the misdiagnosed response to an “at-risk” family resulting in further injury, loss of life or great property damage. It also included a change in philosophy in the leadership of the key players resulting in a shift away from community involvement and participation.

Future research involves asking many “What if...?” questions. The analysis of the impact on the trends based on the occurrence of an event is known as the Cross Impact Analysis. In this analysis, the matter of an organized gang activity had the most consistent impact on the trends from each of the events that were rated. The group felt that this issue would likely result in an increased response to all of the listed trends. The greatest impact was felt in an obvious concern for an increase in violent behavior. Also rated as likely to occur were both an increased response in the involvement of the Latino

community as well as the resultant widening margin existing between economic groups in the community. It is also significant to note that of all of the listed events, organized gang activity was rated as having the greatest likelihood of occurrence.

If we could look clearly into the future, would we view an idealistic world or a horrific view of tomorrow? An issue the NGT group feared could happen would be a system failure from a key provider of services. The following vignette is a sample of a dreaded future should that happen:

On May 5, 2008, shortly before noon, the organizers for the annual Cinco de Mayo parade were making the final arrangements on the floats prior to beginning the festivities. This joyful celebration was soon disrupted by the **marauding gang of punks** on motorized in-line skates. They were known as the Neo-skinned Knees. They took their name from the characteristic damage done from the high speed falls that often occurred on this motorized version of a once peaceful activity.

This group had specialized in **anti-social and repugnant racist behavior**. They got their kicks from disrupting community gatherings and by a **violent display of hatred of almost anything**. As they approached the lead float, they released their weapons of disruption. It was a modified molotov cocktail device. This one was filled with a caustic corrosive. The chemical hit its target and was burning the skin and eyes of those in the area. "This land is my land," they shouted, "not yours.", as they sped away in their skates. They disrupted the parade and caused injury to over 30 people.

The Police were only able to capture two of the estimated 25 gang members. All of them were in the 13 to 15 year age group. **All were supposed to be in school today but no one seemed to want to enforce the old daytime curfew law**. Fortunately, there were two that missed the curb jump and hit the ground hard during their attempted escape. They were treated for their injuries to their knees and released to the police.

These juvenile delinquents had been arrested before for similar crimes. Nothing seemed to get their attention or direct them to a more productive behavior.

**In checking with the booking desk at juvenile hall, they were denied an “in-house” booking since there were no fatalities from their attack. “Cite them out to a diversion group.”, was the message from the desk officer. The officers grumbled out loud that nothing would be accomplished with the diversion group. These kids will fail the diversion and be out terrorizing our community before the weekend. They all seemed to acknowledge the truth to their dilemma. “When will somebody fix this problem?” they muttered to themselves.**

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The futures research conducted using the Nominal Group Technique has provided, a basis to help define the kinds of future services that will be provided for at-risk families. Of course, futures research is not a crystal ball into the future. There is a possibility, although not likely, that an unforeseen event could change the entire nature of police services to at-risk families. Barring a remote event, and assuming the validity of the NGT process, the services in our future will continue to address specific needs that present themselves.

The emerging concerns that surfaced in the NGT revolved around the following issues: gang activity, violent behavior towards others, self-destructive behavior, and limited government services. In many ways, the work that has just begun with diversion specialty groups mentioned earlier in this paper are on the right track to address the dawning issues of tomorrow. In particular, the services directed towards Anger Management, Mentoring Programs, and Parenting Skills appear to be aptly suited to these future concerns.

The use of volunteer service providers from the private sector blends in well with the shifting and reduced services provided by government providers. Current weaknesses,

as well as an area of significant importance, was found in addressing the needs of the Hispanic community. In many ways, this process has helped focus attention on this current deficiency.

There are some people in our society who feel it is important to provide alternative services for youthful offenders. There are also those that feel the system should be directed at a more punitive program. Little can be done to convince this latter group of the value of diversion services. Regardless of personal feelings about alternative programs, one thing remains clear Diversion services for at-risk families in the Sonoma area will continue into the foreseeable future. They will exist because at this time and hopefully in the future, there is a drive from the service providing community to supply the energy needed to sustain them. There is also a heavily burdened judicial system that cannot effectively absorb the existing number of youthful offenders. While it is possible that the judicial system could be expanded to accept the increased case load of youthful offenders, it does not seem likely. The success of a diversion program seems to be dependent upon the good will and support of community members and professionals that are willing to provide assistance to at-risk families.

This examination of the future services for at-risk youth and their families provides Law Enforcement managers an opportunity to make a current assessment and a future response for services. Leadership in this area is not found by ignoring the at-risk youth or their families. It is found in creating dialogue with the community, establishing partnerships with service providers and creating an open atmosphere where schools, families, law enforcement, and the community have an opportunity to participate in the solution.

Currently services that are provided to at-risk youth and their families seem to focus on trends not ranked highly by the NGT process. It seems clear that if we stay on our current course, we will miss future needs of the community.

While it is certain no one has a precise view of the future it is certain that if Law Enforcement is to be a leader tomorrow, new issues must be responded and the challenge of new problem willingly accepted..

Beyond the role of Law Enforcement, if the children of today are to be the leaders of tomorrow, then providing services to at-risk youth and their families is not only the right thing to do, but the only thing to do, simply because our future depends on it.