Impact of a Comprehensive “Whole Child” Intervention and Prevention Program Among Youth at Risk for Gang Involvement and Other Forms of Delinquency

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Abstract

Youth in gang-ridden neighborhoods are at risk of trauma-related mental health disorders, which is a preceptor to school failure and delinquency. They rarely seek out services for those problems. The Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (JIPP), a school-based gang intervention and prevention program in Los Angeles, targets at-risk students by using a systemic whole child approach, a holistic perspective where all aspects of a child are treated and supported. JIPP instills a positive change in the student’s behavior, academic performance, family interaction and their psycho-social-emotional coping skills. The program takes into consideration three macro areas of the students’ lives: family, education, and community. These macro areas are broken down into four micro areas of intervention: psycho-social-emotional, academic, bio-behavioral, and family system support. These four micro areas are supported with specific interventions designed to address the "whole child" approach of intervention. The macro goal is to provide clear, coherent, and supportive interventions that will enable students to experience success in school, in the home, and in the community. The micro goals are to reduce suspension rates, behavioral referrals, dropout rates, truancy, gang activity, and graffiti at the school site.

KEY WORDS: depression; at-risk youth; trauma; gang prevention; Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program; Ripple Effects
**Background**

Trauma from exposure to family and community violence puts adolescents at risk behaviorally, emotionally, and academically (Hawkins, Farrington & Catalano, 1998). It is linked to aggressive behavior, lower academic performance, lower levels of social competence and negative mental health outcomes, including posttraumatic stress symptoms such as emotional numbing and increased arousal (Siegfried, Ko & Kelley, 2004). A consistent association has been found between traumatic exposure to interpersonal violence and both substance abuse and depression. Exposure to violence is associated with these negative mental health outcomes, even after taking into account other socio-economic and familial variables (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995, 1996; Kessler et al., 1995; Resnick et al., 1997).

Hopelessness, self-blame, and lack of control can result from trauma. These feelings can lead to overwhelming despair and an inability to imagine the future (Cole et al., 2005). Violence is both cause and effect in the spiral of emotional trauma. “Youth exposed to traumatic events present not just internalizing problems, such as depression or anxiety, but also externalizing problems like aggression, conduct problems, and oppositional or defiant behavior” (Ford, Chapman, Hawke, & Albert, 2007). Offending and other subsequent victimization typically occur following exposure to family or community violence. Recent studies have proposed that trauma is the lynchpin between mental health states and the development and persistence of conduct disorder.

Many researchers agree with Susan Cole’s assertion that “trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to a stressful experience in which a person’s ability to cope is dramatically undermined” (Cole et al, 2005, p. 18). Evidence suggests that coping strategies can increase resilience in the face of trauma (Bonnano, 2005); that cognitive-behavioral strategies to change self-talk can be effective interventions for depression (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006); and that cognitive-behavioral-mindfulness training can help prevent sub-clinical youth depression from reaching the stage of medical disorder (NIMH, 2004).

Some of these same strategies have been shown to directly reduce anti-social behavior as well. Training in social-cognitive-behavioral strategies, attention focusing, social-skill training and personal guidance have all been linked to improved outcomes (Lipsey, 2007).

However, youth who have been exposed to family or community-based trauma in poor, gang-ridden neighborhoods rarely seek out mental health resources for training in these methods. Even if they do seek them out, those services are rarely accessible in their communities. When some services are available, the chance that the service will be culturally competent, evidence-based and precisely matched to the particular background and individual risk factors of each young person is extremely low.

*The Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program (JIPP)*, instituted in the fall of 2006 by an alliance between the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Local District 4, the Los Angeles Police Department, Rampart Division (LAPD), Families in Schools, and California
Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program

State University, Los Angeles, is a comprehensive “whole child” program that seeks to address the interdependent variables that affect academic, social and mental health outcomes among students with multiple risks who have exhibited delinquent or pre-delinquent behavior, in a community setting that is characterized by personal and collective trauma. JIPP provides evidence-based strategies to address risk factors in multiple domains: self, school, family and community.

JIPP has four concentrated micro-interventions: 1) Bio-Behavioral; 2) Psycho-Social-Emotional; 3) Academic; and 4) Family System Support. These components combined and equally represented by appropriate interventions seek to address the issues that serve as barriers to success. They aim to awaken the feeling of hope in adolescents and empower them to take control of their present and future. JIPP’s holistic approach engulfs the “whole child” in a multitude of positive interactions with people and interventions specifically designed to address the needs of the most at-risk students.

Methods

Students are selected for participation in the program by deans, administrators, and counselors of the various feeder schools that comprise the Belmont High School Community, as well as by Student Attendance Review Boards, the City Attorney’s Office, and the Department of Children and Family Services. These students are assigned to the program as an alternative to suspension or in support of the positive behavior intervention policy as prescribed by the LAUSD positive behavior discipline policy. Students are also referred by the Juvenile Court for truancy and other misdemeanors.

Setting

The setting for this study is the Belmont High School Community, located in the Pico-Union district of Los Angeles. The neighborhood has the highest concentration of immigrants, non-citizens, low-income families, households with second languages, and residents without a high school diploma in all of Los Angeles. It is notorious for housing two of the country’s infamous gangs, 18th Street and Mara Salvatruchas, as well as being home to what the Los Angeles Police Department gang unit identifies as the “Ten Gangs” (local gangs that are relatively smaller but have a chronic negative effect on the community). These socio-economic factors put students at serious risk for academic failure, anti-social behavior, negative peer interaction and emotional injury and illness.

At JIPP’s conception, Belmont was one of the largest high schools in the country operating on a 3-track year round schedule, servicing over 5,700 students. Its graduation rate hovered around 56%, almost 30% lower than the California average. The school, at 1,500 students has recently been divided into several smaller schools, known as small learning communities, all housed on the same campus. Two new campuses have been built in the neighborhood to relieve overcrowding.
In its first two years of operation, more than 387 students have participated in JIPP, with a graduation rate of 52%, roughly two-thirds being high school students, and one-third being middle school students. The population was overwhelmingly Latino (91%), with some African American students. Seventy-one percent of participants were male. This is a highly transient population, with some students moving in and out of correctional settings and many students part of an undocumented Latino underclass, traveling back and forth from their country of origin to pursue economic opportunities. All of these students had previously experienced school failure, most of them due to behavioral offenses. This population has been identified as being at very high-risk of dropping out, becoming involved in gang activity, or being involved with the juvenile justice system. Both parental permission and student consent are required for participation in the JIPP program, including any medical tests or intervention.

**Program Overview**

The first six week module of JIPP is “Resistance”, a bio-behavioral physical training curriculum designed to reduce resistance to psychological and behavioral change. This first six week component, run by LAPD officers from the Rampart Division, is designed to define and instill clear boundaries and expectations of positive behavior for the JIPP participants. The officers introduce strict codes of behavior through a comprehensive physical training modality that is aimed at getting the students more in tune with appropriate boundaries and build self-esteem by achieving physical proficiency.

This is accomplished by the officers implementing a regimented and pre-designed physical training module. Measurable outcomes are collected in various physical activities. These activities include a one mile run, sit-ups, push-ups and various other physical training exercises. The participants’ performance is measured at the beginning and at the end of the “Resistance” stage. Results are shared with the students and further goals are set to meet throughout the remaining twelve weeks of the program.

Under the direction of Officer Larry Covington, Community Relations Officer of Rampart and Co-Founder/Director of JIPP, the officers are required to participate and successfully complete a three-hour training in-service by an LAPD psychologist for working with at-risk youths. This training includes instruction on the best practices in appropriate confrontation of adolescents, mediation and conflict resolution. The officers’ goal is to inculcate discipline for the student, not to the student. The officers also set forth clear expectations of behavior, citizenship and identification of negative behavior patterns.

JIPP participants have experienced a great deal of past failures in and out of school. In developing skills to follow direction, they are led to begin to experience feelings of success. Many participants are unable to complete the simplest physical exercises in the beginning. Throughout the first six-week module that concentrates on the bio-behavioral facet of the student, participants’ sense of self-esteem and regard for themselves improves

as they develop greater levels of physical prowess. The concentration of the bio-
behavioral intervention also allows the participants an opportunity to get out of their
minds and experience their bodies.

Empowerment

After they complete the first module of “Resistance”, the students are divided by
school level, middle school and high school; the students enter into the second six-week
module of “Empowerment.” In addition to the intense regimented physical training
conducted by the officers, students’ self-esteem and sense of accomplishment is
developed in classes instructed by the officers. During the second six-week module of
JIPP, “Empowerment” and continuing into the last six weeks, “Leadership,” the officers
remain involved by teaching public speaking and job interviewing classes as well as the
“Pillars of Success” curriculum which consists of lessons in trustworthiness, respect,
responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

During the “Empowerment” stage, JIPP also introduces one component of the
psycho-social intervention. Ripple Effects is an interactive software program, delivered in
English, which consists of 390 tutorials, more than 5000 screens, that collectively present
a comprehensive body of strategies shown to be effective in live instruction settings
(Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Lessons are organized into strengths (assets), problems
(behavioral, academic, social), and reasons (risk factors “inside you” and “outside you” at
individual, family peer, school, community and social structure levels).

These tutorials are cross indexed by concrete “challenges” in the domains of self,
family, peers, school, community and larger society. Tutorials are peer narrated, reading-
dependent training modules, which take about 15 minutes each to complete. They are
comprised of photos, illustrations, videos, sound, text, and interactive exercises, with a
hip-hop look and feel. The interactive screens of each tutorial were defined as core
components and are tracked via an electronic scorecard.

Prior scientific research has shown Ripple Effects to be an effective intervention on
multiple levels. Eight randomized controlled trials and three studies conducted since 1999
with more than 4,700 students have shown it to positively impact school outcomes (GPA,
attendance, suspensions, retention, tardiest), strengthen social-emotional skills (empathy,
assertiveness, and problem solving), and improve behavior. Process studies have shown
that when given the chance to do so, students will use the software to explore previously
undisclosed trauma-related issues.

Content drawn from Ripple Effects is specifically configured to fit the overall goals
of the JIPP program and is delivered in two six-week courses to the students. The first
course, with a theme of empowerment, focuses on building personal strengths.
Specifically it was designed to promote core social-emotional competencies which could
increase resilience in the face of adverse situations and enable good decision-making and
positive social behavior. It includes training in cognitive, behavior and mindfulness
strategies that have been linked to self-efficacy, resilience, reduced depression and rates of
PTSD and improved academic achievement (Bandura, 1997; Benard, 2004; Butler et al., 2006; Zins et al., 2004).

The second six-week Ripple Effects course is configured to promote leadership skills and address social responsibility. It emphasizes practical problem-solving and conflict resolution skills as a means to channel frustration, anger or depression into activism and civic participation. A major premise of the Ripple Effects program is that, if young people who have undergone personal trauma and social discrimination are expected not to drop out of school or numb their pain with alcohol or drugs, then schools and communities must provide training not only in skills to survive the trauma but in skills to change unjust social systems that are the source of much of their pain.

The class sessions are divided into two activities. The first consists of a thirty-minute computer lab session in which students work individually through the prescribed interactive topics on their computers. Students are then able to privately explore tutorials to address their personal risk factors. Thus, the program has both strength-building and risk-reducing functions.

The second part of the psycho-social intervention is a forty-five minute breakout session in which students participate in group discussions about topics that arise as a result of their personal exploration within the Ripple Effects program. These post-program discussions are facilitated by graduate level students from California State University, Los Angeles, who are compiling hours for their California Pupil Personnel Services and Child Welfare and Attendance counseling credentials, a prerequisite to becoming a school social worker in LAUSD. Clinical supervision is provided by and Co-Founder/Director of JIPP and Assistant Principal Stephen Koffman, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW).

Ripple Effects is designed to build resilience and problem solving abilities through development of broad social emotional competence. Ripple Effects was chosen for the psycho-social component because of its close alignment with JIPP’s standards and goals. Research-based and LAUSD-approved, Ripple Effects is used by the district as an individualized alternative to suspension. A fundamental purpose of Ripple Effects at JIPP is to help students understand the underlying reasons for engaging in anti-social, self-defeating or risky behaviors and to identify and enact positive strategies that will lead to academic and life success despite obstacles. Ripple Effects helps increase adolescent coping strategies and uses cognitive, behavioral, social skill, and attention focusing mindfulness strategies proven to be effective in reducing depression and PTSD in live settings.

A further intervention that takes place during the “Empowerment” stage is focused on academics. Students continue in their previously divided groups determined by school grade, either middle or high school. Each group receives 1 ½ hours of English and math remediation in support of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), a prerequisite for graduating and receiving a high school diploma in the state of California.

Students remain in the academic intervention for twelve weeks during the “Empowerment” and “Leadership” modules of JIPP. They participate in both a pre-intervention baseline exam as well as a post-intervention baseline exam to establish measurable outcomes for
the effectiveness of the delivery of instruction. The academic intervention also serves as a credit recovery program allowing each student that participates in 30 hours of instruction to receive 2.5 elective credits towards graduation also.

Through attainment of signed release of information forms by the parents or guardians of the JIPP participants, the California State University, Los Angeles counseling interns also have contact with the school-based counselors of each student also. This purpose is two-fold, the first being the personalized attention each student experiences throughout JIPP; and second, the student is held more accountable not only to him/herself but to the officers and academic instructors seen during regular school hours. In addition, school attendance and behavior is monitored during the students’ participation in JIPP.

Leadership

The third six-week module is “Leadership”. After succeeding in the aforementioned interventions, students next embark on the final leg of their transformation journey. The officers continue teaching their enrichment classes with instruction in leadership skills, job interviewing and public speaking. To continue building leadership skills, outperforming students from the previous two modules are chosen for leadership for the remaining time in JIPP and groomed for leadership to become a “Black Shirts.” These identified students receive additional personalized instruction in leadership and communication skills to serve as peer mentors and peer leaders for the participants of the next JIPP cohort. “Black Shirts” then become candidates for LAPD’s Explorer program.

“Black Shirts” wear a specialized black shirt with the JIPP emblem as a merit of their assumed leadership role. It is an important characteristic because participants adhere to not only a strict behavior code but also to a dress code. During the “Resistance” module and throughout the bio-behavioral intervention, participants are required to wear physical training “PT” attire, gray sweat pants, a white t-shirt with their last name stenciled on front, and a gray sweatshirt. During the academic, counseling and enrichment classes, participants are required to wear business attire, black pants, black shoes and socks, a white shirt and black tie. All aspects of the uniform must be neatly arranged at all times.

Parenting

The final intervention is delivered within the family system. Since JIPP is a “whole child” program, parents must participate in an 18-week mandatory psycho-educational parenting class. The parents embark on a parallel process of learning and positive change with their children. The class is designed to serve families facing today’s challenges of raising children in a non-violent and nurturing way. This is accomplished by teaching the parents new, proactive parenting skills in an atmosphere of respect, love, and compassion. The expectations of the parents are the following: come to the parenting classes on time; be open to new strategies and ideas that will benefit better parenting practices; have the opportunity to share best parenting practices amongst themselves; learn from others. The parenting component is designed to empower the parents to make changes in their parenting techniques and to continue networking
through an independent support group outside of the school site. JIPP and the parenting classes are in session on Saturdays only.

The classes are conducted in Spanish and English under the supervision of a psychiatric social worker who is a certified parenting instructor and holds a Masters in Social Work (MSW). The classes are approved by the Department of Child and Family Services and the Juvenile Courts as a certificated program. In addition, each parent is assigned a California State University, Los Angeles intern as a case manager for the duration of JIPP. The goal of the class is to provide parents with new strategies as well as the tools needed to optimize current parenting skills.

**Outcomes Measures**

There were three levels of outcome measures used to evaluate program impact: psycho-social emotional (depression); behavioral (discipline referrals/suspension rates); and academic (test scores). The depression measure is the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1988). School discipline referrals and suspension rates measured behavior, while test scores served as the measure for academic performance. Data indicates improved outcomes on all measures after the interventions. Beck Depression Inventory scores declined from before to after the intervention. After the intervention, the number of students who fit into the normal range increased from 35% to 66%. Mild mood disturbances, borderline clinical depression, and moderate depression all dropped upon completion of the program.

Since implementing JIPP, suspension rates have significantly decreased. The number of days of suspension has decreased by 50%, and the number of incidents of suspension has decreased by more than 90%. Suspension rates for disruptive or defiant behavior have decreased by more than 70%. The reduced rate of suspensions for defiance and all other suspendable offenses can be viewed as a direct result of the creation and implementation of the JIPP program on Belmont’s campus.

The JIPP program is viewed by administrators, deans, and staff as one of the most effective deterrents initiated to combat students’ negative behaviors that have traditionally resulted in full-day suspensions. Since implementing JIPP referrals as a consequence for students’ negative behavior, Belmont has seen a reduced rate of recidivism among previously suspended students and new offenders. The decrease of suspendable offences allows both students and teachers alike to enjoy the increased levels of campus safety and security.

The effectiveness of the JIPP program has been an asset in assisting Belmont to become compliant with district-stated goals in the new LAUSD Positive Behavior Discipline Policy and adhere to the spirit of an alternative to suspension plan as mandated by LAUSD. In addition, the reduction of full-day suspensions results in more instructional time.

Most JIPP students showed improvement in both English and math test scores after completing the program. One out of every four students gained 10% or more in their English test scores from pre-to-post intervention. Thirty-six percent of the students gained 10%
or more in their math test scores. In the English academic class, 56% of students showed an improvement, while 58% of students showed an improvement in math.

This preliminary data suggests that a program designed to consider the “whole child” in the form of a comprehensive set of services and interventions may be an effective tool to promote mental health and reduce depression among youth with multiple risk factors, most of whom might otherwise be reluctant to take advantage of mental health services. That promise of efficacy is not proof. The fact that one student’s exit data was missing because he had been murdered provides a reminder of the urgency of addressing the interlinking issues of youth trauma, violence, and mental health.

**Conclusion**

Since JIPP’s inception, the program has been presented at the 39th Annual Juvenile Court, Community and Alternative School Administrators of California, the 20th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference and invited to the 21st Annual At-Risk National Forum, *School and Community: Working Together as a Comprehensive Approach to Dropout Prevention*.

JIPP has also been recognized by the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education. In addition, JIPP has received an award from the California Peace Officers Association and is a recent recipient of the AT&T “Aspire” grant, the only LAUSD School or program to be awarded the grant. Most recently JIPP was named as a sub-contractor in the Los Angeles Mayor’s Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program.

It is the contention of JIPP that positive interaction with police officers in recreational, educational and athletic activities in conjunction with the schools and community creates an avenue for adolescents to become involved in their neighborhood in a constructive manner. JIPP believes that given the right opportunities and interactions, adolescents will build a healthy, positive attitude towards the police, school, themselves and society.
References


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Officer Larry Covington, Community Relations Officer of the Los Angeles Police Department, Rampart Division. Officer Covington’s strong involvement and familiarity with the Pico-Union community has provided him with the foresight and knowledge to co-design the Juvenile Intervention and Prevention Program.

Alice Ray, MBA, the CEO of San Francisco-based Ripple Effects, has dedicated her professional life to designing and implementing programs to reduce violence and promote positive outcomes for children and youth.

Sarah Berg, a Vice President with San Francisco-based Ripple Effects, has spent the past decade developing, supporting implementation of, training on, and conducting research on Ripple Effects' technology tools for children and adults.

Max Vasquez, MA is currently the instructional math coach at Belmont High School in Los Angeles. Mr. Vasquez was responsible for the tabulation of all data collected for this article. Mr. Vasquez teaches the math intervention classes for JIPP.

Nadine Albarran, MS of Los Angeles recently graduated from California State University, Los Angeles and was responsible for facilitating the peer group in support of Ripple Effects.