

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project: reducing violence in the community through a jail-based initiative

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Abstract

Background The usual modes of incarceration have not been found to curb violent crimes significantly. A jail-based programme called the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) was created with the hypothesis that exposing men with a history of serious, recent and often multiple violent crimes to a certain specifiable set of social, cultural and psychological conditions would reduce the frequency and severity of their violent behaviour.

Methods Court and criminal records for 1 year following release were reviewed for 101 inmates who had spent 8 weeks or more in the programme and for the same number of those who had spent 8 weeks or more in regular custody.

Results Inmates who participated in RSVP had lower re-arrest rates for violent crimes (–46.3 per cent, $p < 0.05$) and spent less time in custody (–42.6 per cent, $p < 0.05$). The decline in violent re-arrests increased with greater lengths of stay (–53.1 per cent, $p < 0.05$ for 12 weeks or more; –82.6 per cent, $p < 0.05$ for 16 weeks or more).

Conclusions Multilevel, comprehensive prevention approaches that: emphasize making available to violent individuals the kinds of tools they need in order to develop non-violent skills and reality-based sources of self-esteem; increase their capacity to experience feelings of empathy and remorse; and provide opportunities to take responsibility and amend the injuries they have inflicted on others and on the whole community, may play an important role in reducing the cycle of violent crime.

Keywords: violence, violence prevention, violent offenders, restorative justice

Introduction

The United States has the highest homicide rate of any industrialized nation, averaging, in most years, five times the rates of other English-speaking democracies (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and 10 times the rates experienced in the United Kingdom, the rest of western Europe and Japan. The homicide incidence, almost 11 per 100 000 citizens at its peak, has prompted many United States governmental and non-governmental officials to declare it a public health emergency. Nevertheless, even though deaths from violent injuries cause more years of life lost before the ages of 65–70 than heart disease

and cancer combined, a National Academy of Sciences report showed that we spend 14–25 times as much money for heart disease or cancer research alone as we do for research on violence, per year of life lost.¹ While United States' rates of violent crime, including murder and manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault, fell slightly during the last few years of the twentieth century, they are still a massive social problem.

A growing number of programmes are implemented in an attempt to curb the epidemic, although few have been comprehensive in scope or well evaluated.^{2–4} One method that has become more widespread than any other without much empirical backing is the incarceration-oriented, punitive approach. This simplistic solution has resulted in an escalation of prisons and police, as well as of capital punishment, in accordance with the current socio-political climate. For the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the United States' incarceration rate in jails and prisons averaged about 100 (± 20) per 100 000 population, during which time the murder rate fluctuated from 4 to 10. The murder rate peaked during the years of Prohibition and the Depression of the 1930s, when it reached levels of 8–10; it then reached record lows of 4.5–6 from 1940 to 1969, following which it increased once again to epidemic levels of 8–11, until it fell to as low as 6 by the last few years of the twentieth century, only to begin rising again after 2000. During the last quarter of the century, however, the incarceration rate underwent a continued and unprecedented escalation, from an average of 100 to almost 700 per 100 000 population (the highest in the world, and the highest in the United States' history) – with no observable effect on the murder rate. By 1998, the murder rate finally reached its lowest level in 30 years, not when the incarceration rate reached the highest level in the United States' history – it

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had already broken that record many times – but only when the unemployment rate reached the lowest level in 30 years, and the percentage of relative poverty among the minority groups most vulnerable to homicidal behaviour reached their lowest levels. Once unemployment and relative poverty began increasing again, after 2000, the murder rate stopped declining notwithstanding the unprecedented and constantly increasing incarceration rate.

The shocking finding is that some of the approaches intended for deterrence may actually stimulate violence, rather than assist in controlling it.⁵ Courses of action that increase punishment and hinder reintegration of the individual into the community have been carried out without knowledge or regard of their effects on the individuals involved, as well as on the community and society at large. Both the National Academy of Sciences' expert committee¹ and other investigators, such as Zimring and Hawkins,⁶ state that, based on the policy's key assumptions, the dramatic increase in incarceration should have virtually eliminated crime in the United States many years ago. Instead, bulging prisons have not correlated with any demonstrable dampening of crime.⁷ Linsky and Strauss⁸ found that states with the highest incarceration rates had the highest crime rates – a pattern that still continues, as persons who experience incarceration exhibit greater criminality once released into the community.^{9,10} Apart from the negative effects of incarceration on prospects of job employment and social readjustment, one can postulate that concentrated exposure to the mores and attitudes that condone violence will promote recidivism.

If the goal is to reduce the incidence of violence, what if time spent in jail is used for rehabilitative and restorative, rather than retributive but counterproductive, purposes? Decreasing recidivism by supporting prevention contributes to the safety of the public and also reduces the financial burden that crime places on the community, which in direct costs alone has been estimated at US\$17.6 billion nationally.¹¹ In San Francisco, over 46 000 crimes were committed in the city between January and October 1996, and direct costs to local victims were estimated at \$24.4 million. The costs of incarceration of San Francisco county's 2000+ inmates, on the other hand, was nearly \$51 million annually, with the incarceration costs for violent offenders exceeding \$19 million yearly.¹² This did not include the astronomical costs of prosecuting violent offenders and other criminal justice expenditures. A programme aimed at reducing recidivism seemed crucial, and this paper illustrates the implementation of a project called the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP), which focuses on restoration and prevention of further violence, rather than retribution for the past.

The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project

The San Francisco County Sheriff's Department established the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project in September 1997. The programme is designed to use the jail system as a setting for working with a vast spectrum of violent offenders, from first-time or early offenders to career criminals of heinous crimes. Inmates can be mandated to the programme by the San Francisco

Sheriff's Department, the courts, or the Adult Probation Department at the time of booking, during incarceration, or after sentencing. Most sentences entail completing a probationary period following release from jail. Due to a long waiting list, not all those who are sentenced or referred get into the programme (which created a 'control group' for the purposes of evaluation).

The three main components that make up RSVP include: offender accountability, victim restoration and community involvement. Goals of the programme are to reduce recidivism and to promote offender accountability by: (1) taking responsibility for one's actions and accepting the possibility for change; (2) identifying and analyzing the social, cultural and personal belief systems that promote one's violent behaviour; (3) recognizing that one has a choice at the critical time of violent response; (4) increasing awareness of the effects of one's behaviour and empathy for victims; and (5) preparing to take on a restorative role when back in the community. Offender accountability is considered to be one of the core concepts of the programme, for it is felt that punishment does not work on criminal offenders who lack the capacity for guilt feelings or remorse, or even the sense of self. As long as violent offenders see no alternatives to their own behaviour but see themselves as a victim of the correctional system, punishment will only serve as a hindrance to reform.

The Offender Accountability component begins with an in-house jail programme, which typically serves 56 inmates at any given time. The duration of any inmate's participation in the programme depends on the length of time he resides in an all-male, 62-bed direct supervision dormitory, where the programme is located. A treatment milieu is created through an intensive, 12-hours-a-day, 6-days-a-week programme consisting of workshops, academic classes, theatrical enactments, counselling sessions and communications with victims of violence.

The Victim Restoration component aids the victims of RSVP offender participants by working collaboratively with a wide range of social organizations, including domestic violence-related criminal justice and social service agencies, and through case management, advocacy and referrals. These survivors are given opportunities to restore themselves through group and individual counselling, community theatre – sometimes with the offenders – and public speaking. Weekly presentations within the jail by victims of violence who describe the suffering they have endured are an essential part of supporting victims through their healing process, as well as implementing victim-driven violence prevention by helping perpetrators build empathy for victims.

The Community Restoration component of RSVP consists of continued weekly workshops, forums for public education, community theatre, visual arts and public awareness campaigns. This component also works with public and private agencies to facilitate community meetings, public speaking in schools, law enforcement training and involvement of criminal justice agencies. While the components were chosen after a restorative justice model involving all parties affected by an individual's violence, the characteristic of the programme is

that it attempts to be comprehensive, recognizing that the causes of violence are multi-factorial and cannot be solved through uni-dimensional solutions.

The programme exhibited an almost instantaneous, dramatic decrease of violent episodes in-house,¹³ and this study evaluates its effectiveness in terms of violent recidivism once participants are released into the community.

(A more detailed description of RSVP or consultation on how to initiate a similar program is available through the authors.)

Methods

Sample

Data for this analysis were drawn retrospectively from the following: (1) information extrapolated from the programme paper files; and (2) information from the City and County of San Francisco and State of California Criminal Justice Information Systems (i.e. Police, Court and Department of Justice automated records). They formed the basis of a pilot project to a 3-year longitudinal assessment of RSVP. Using the Sheriff's Department RSVP paper files, inmates who went through at least 8 weeks of RSVP between September 1997 and September 1999 were selected for investigation. A control group of inmates were selected among violent offenders who would have been eligible for RSVP but served their time in an ordinary jail due to lack of space in the programme, using the same inclusion and exclusion criteria. Information obtained from both court and criminal records for the county and state were combined and cross-referenced to form a profile of re-arrest data for each subject, including types of charges and dates. As the primary goal of the study was to determine RSVP's effectiveness in reducing re-arrests for violence, inmates who were sent directly to prison following their jail term were excluded from recidivism study. Retention rates did not apply, since enrolment in RSVP is mandatory for qualifying inmates (as far as there is room), and dropping out was not possible unless they were released from jail.

Statistical analyses

Initial calculations involved descriptive analyses of demographic factors in the computer system, including age, race and age at first arrest. Independent *t*-tests, and χ^2 test for race, were performed to confirm comparability of the two groups. Independent *t*-tests were also performed to assess the comparability in prior arrest history for these groups. Outcomes for these groups were measured similarly, through the comparisons of: (1) violent re-arrest rates in the first post-release year; (2) overall re-arrest rates in the first post-release year; (3) time interval between release and first violent re-arrest; (4) time interval between release and first re-arrest; and (5) days spent in custody during the first post-release year. To assess lengths of stay and their influence on recidivism, *t*-tests were used for the following: (1) violent re-arrest rates in the first year for those who

have been in RSVP or in the regular jail system for 12 weeks or more, and (2) violent re-arrest rates in the first year for those who have been in RSVP or in the regular jail system for 16 weeks or more. Independent *t*-tests were deemed appropriate in each of the above cases, as the samples compared were independent but of similar sizes, relatively large with roughly normal distributions, and with similar variances (except for divergences in the group of 16 weeks or more, in which cases equal variances were not assumed). Log rank tests were used for days to first violent or any arrest after release. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS/PC version 10.0.

Results

A total of 101 programme subjects were selected based on the above criteria, and the same number of control subjects were randomly chosen to match. Descriptive data for the subject groups appear in Table 1. Inmates in either group generally had a significant criminal history over the past year, with a mean of 1.36 (SD=1.77) overall arrests and 0.56 (SD=0.88) violent arrests. The analysis results, given in Table 2, showed that inmates who participated in RSVP were significantly less likely to be re-arrested on violent charges, remained longer in the community before being re-arrested, and spent less time in custody during follow-up in comparison to inmates who did not undergo the programme. For a more accurate comparison, recidivism rates for RSVP subjects were adjusted for days in the community.

All subjects experienced a lower level of recidivism after incarceration. The reduction in violent recidivism was much greater among RSVP participants at 66.7 per cent ($t=4.74$; $p < 5 \times 10^{-6}$) as opposed to 41.0 per cent among control subjects ($t=2.39$; $p < 0.01$). The reduction in overall recidivism was also greater among RSVP participants at 48.3 per cent ($t=4.30$; $p < 5 \times 10^{-5}$) as opposed to 34.7 per cent among control subjects ($t=2.57$; $p < 0.01$). Reductions in violent recidivism was related to greater lengths of participation. Control subjects who spent 8 weeks or more in regular jail ($n=101$) as opposed to the equivalent time in RSVP ($n=101$) were one and three-quarters more likely to be re-arrested for violent charges during the first post-release year ($p < 0.05$). Those who spent 12 weeks or more in regular jail ($n=71$) rather than equivalent RSVP participation ($n=66$) were over twice as likely to be re-arrested for violence ($p < 0.05$). Those who spent 16 weeks or more ($n=61$) were re-arrested five times as often compared with the equivalent RSVP group ($n=30$) ($p < 0.05$). Although the results for those incarcerated for 16 weeks or longer are dramatic, the weaker statistical strength due to the smaller sample sizes and greater variances should be taken into consideration.

Discussion

Do the results demonstrate effectiveness of RSVP's approach as a means of curbing violence? It would have been best to establish

Table 1 Demographic and criminal characteristics of programme and control groups

Variable	Programme (n = 101)		Control (n = 101)		Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Age (years)	32.0	9.20	33.4	10.2	NS*
Race	Percentage		Percentage		
Caucasian†	26.7%		31.7%		NS
Black	42.6%		49.5%		NS
Hispanic	13.9%		5.9%		NS
Asian or other	14.9%		12.9%		NS
Length of stay (days)	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
	159.1	82.0	158.6	100.4	NS
Length of stay in RSVP (days)	110.9	58.3	NA‡	NA	NA
Age of first arrest (years)	23.0	6.67	24.7	9.22	NS
Number of arrests in past year	1.32	1.41	1.41	2.08	NS
Number of violent arrests in past year	0.56	0.78	0.55	0.96	NS

*t- or χ^2 test not significant.

†It is possible that Hispanic inmates are included here, due to their previous categorization as 'White'.

‡Not applicable for comparison purposes.

Table 2 Comparison of recidivism indicators after release from jail

Recidivism indicators	RSVP group		Control group		Difference	Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
≥8 weeks in custody	(n = 101)		(n = 101)			<i>T</i> <i>p</i>
No. of violent re-arrests (adjusted)	0.18	0.36	0.33	0.67	-46.3%	-1.99 0.03*
No. of re-arrests (adjusted)	0.64	0.90	0.92	1.26	-30.7%	-1.82 0.05*
No. of incarcerations	0.42	0.62	0.51	0.89	-17.6%	-0.92 0.18
No. of days in custody	29.8	68.5	51.9	90.9	-42.6%	-1.84 0.03*
						<i>F</i> <i>p</i>
No. of days until first violent re-arrest	333	90.0	286	124	16.4%	6.66 0.01*
No. of days until first re-arrest	306	119	248	145	23.4%	4.14 0.04*
≥12 weeks in custody	(n = 66)		(n = 71)			<i>T</i> <i>p</i>
No. of violent re-arrests (adjusted)	0.16	0.38	0.34	0.79	-53.1%	-1.72 0.04*
No. of re-arrests (adjusted)	0.63	0.92	0.87	1.27	-27.0%	-0.87 0.11
No. of incarcerations	0.41	0.60	0.46	0.86	10.9%	-0.42 0.34
No. of days in custody	30.2	68.5	46.2	90.2	-28.4%	-1.10 0.14
						<i>F</i> <i>p</i>
No. of days until first violent re-arrest	339	86.2	287	125	18.1%	7.96 0.00*
No. of days until first re-arrest	301	127	247	150	21.9%	2.82 0.09
≥16 weeks in custody	(n = 30)		(n = 61)			<i>T</i> <i>p</i>
No. of violent re-arrests (adjusted)	0.06	0.22	0.33	0.72	-82.6%	-2.02 0.02*
No. of re-arrests (adjusted)	0.61	1.00	0.87	1.21	-30.0%	-1.01 0.16
No. of incarcerations	0.35	0.54	0.52	0.91	-32.7%	-0.83 0.20
No. of days in custody	16.8	33.5	53.1	95.1	-65.8%	-1.91 0.03*
						<i>F</i> <i>p</i>
No. of days until first violent re-arrest	353	59.5	312	108	13.1%	12.28 0.00*
No. of days until first re-arrest	300	123	247	152	21.5%	6.84 0.01*

*Significant.

the answer using an experimental design, but this is difficult to do in a field setting, especially within a correctional system, and hence a retrospective study was the alternative. The initial hypothesis was that inmates who participated in RSVP would have fewer violent re-arrests and spend less time in jail in the year after re-entering society than those who did not experience RSVP. This turned out to be the case. It is noteworthy that a programme of 2 months' or more duration would produce such a dramatic alteration of lifetime trends: under the RAND Corporation's determination that any action that effects a change of 10 per cent or more in recidivism is very significant, a 46.3 (after 8 weeks) to 82.6 (after 16 weeks) per cent difference is substantial. As a whole, although the assignment of subjects for the study was not through controlled randomization, all factors were stacked against RSVP: its subjects were of a lower age group, of a greater racial minority constitution, longer in lengths of incarceration, lower in age of first arrest, and higher in rate of arrests for violent charges. This also applies to postulated reasons for improvements in both groups: while the decrease in violent recidivism in RSVP participants is considerable, it is interesting to note that the control group also compiled significantly fewer arrests, unlike the trend in most jails. This may be attributable to the highly rehabilitative conditions of the San Francisco County Jail System, which employs, outside of RSVP, many substantial programmes in the areas of substance abuse, education, life-skills training, etc. Andrews and colleagues documented that in other cities and states¹⁴ incarceration in and of itself increases recidivism by 7 per cent, but if needed treatment and services are offered, it reduces it by 15 per cent, and if training of cognitive skills is given, the reduction is 29 per cent. Given the results in San Francisco, where it is difficult to go through the County Jail System without participation in some kind of programme, it may be predicted that the outcome of RSVP would compare even more favourably to the absence of any programme.

Although far from being a panacea for the complex problems of violent offenders, the programme intended to be a comprehensive, major intervention, addressing violence as a matter not only of individual actions but as a public health matter involving community-wide cognitive, behavioural, affective and socio-cultural conditioning. The results suggest the possible effectiveness of jail-based programmes, that include multidimensional, creative and empathy-building prevention approaches emphasizing restoration over the conventional but unsustainable 'lock them up' approach. The model can be an important springboard for generating hypotheses regarding the causes of violence and for shaping more thoughtful avenues for reducing violent offences and re-offences. Nevertheless, longitudinal multi-site studies are necessary to determine the precise effect of RSVP on violent recidivism. Although not done in this study, due to the precipitous drop in sample size with length of stay (not to mention the unevenness of size between the two groups), it would be valuable to determine the optimal length of participation, at which time improvements in recidivism rates would be highest before the benefits of the programme decline or plateau.

The lack of significant reduction in overall arrest rates is disappointing. Repeat offenders, who were re-arrested despite having refrained from violent offences, were found to return most commonly with drug charges or for old vehicular charges. Informal interviews with programme facilitators suggested possible reasons for the former as being the inability to find a job and looking for a quick way to 'earn a few nickels', and for the latter as not showing up in court to clear up allegations regarding the use of motor vehicles. While this points to the need for more job and coping skills training, in the instances of drug use, the greater number of re-arrests may suggest RSVP's irrelevance in cases of substance addiction and the need for the criminal justice system to address the problem more as a medical rather than a criminal one. The study signals the need perhaps for a wider and greater emphasis on community supervision and court-ordered follow-up after release from jail. A sizeable proportion, perhaps the majority, of RSVP participants have been released without continuing court sanctions or mandatory follow-up in the community during the very early stages of the programme, when all components were yet to be in place. These findings indicate the need for programme staff to work closely with the court and require that all inmates be placed on probation upon release and include as a condition of probation that they participate in programmes. Also, the significant number of pre-trial inmates sentenced to prison following participation in RSVP (excluded from the study) also reflects the need for communication with the court regarding the objectives of the programme. Limitations of the study include the inability to implement an experimental design, as discussed above, which makes it impossible to eliminate the possibility of compounding variables or selection bias. Also, the paucity of demographic data, due to the limited information in the records and to the retrospective design, makes it difficult to determine predictors for success in the programme, although the currently available data can serve as proxies for other information. The method can be improved through more extensive, controlled studies to examine long-term outcomes prospectively and wider applicability of the programme through a multi-centre study.

In addition to examining the impact of a programme on recidivism rates, it is important to evaluate its economic merits, especially during an era of public and political cost-consciousness. Thus, while it is difficult to place a price on protecting the general public and on the quality of life that comes with safety, an analysis can be made as follows. The imprisoned offender requires approximately US\$24 783 per year (the cost of housing of \$21 352 plus medical expenses of \$3 431), or about \$68/day. For inmates' families who go on welfare as a result, the costs on average is an additional \$21/day.¹⁵ All this is without counting medical spending, work loss and need for public programmes, not to mention offender criminal processing, adjudication, probation and parole, unpaid state or federal taxes, and the escalating cost of building new prisons as a result of overcrowding. Counting a reduction of 22.1 days spent in custody during the following year for 110.9 days of RSVP, an additional cost of

\$21/participant-day was incurred to cover all offender, victim and community portions. However, the average 0.14 reduction in re-arrests during the year post-release is an estimated average saving of as much as \$28 000 in total violence-related costs per offender, including medical and mental health spending, victim work loss, public programmes, property damage, criminal justice processing, legal defence, sanctioning and offender work loss.^{16,17} It was found that by reducing violence-related re-arrests and reincarcerations, there was a gain of approximately \$4 in total expenses for every dollar spent for the programme.

Not included here are non-monetary losses from incarceration, such as loss of job skills; disruption of family structure; loss of community integration; further training in violent and socio-pathic mores; loss of avenues for restitution; and increasing likelihood of imprisonment with longer stays in custody. Added together, the benefits that offenders and the public derive from violence prevention programmes such as RSVP are immense. Nevertheless, efforts to expand correctional initiatives without implementing concomitant changes in community environments that engender violence is short-sighted, and ex-offenders, as they rehabilitate into productive rather than destructive members of society, will be a valuable resource here.

Conclusion

RSVP was intended to be a comprehensive, major and multidimensional intervention to decrease violence, and the changes that remained for 1 year post-release following only a short stay in jail attest to the programme's effectiveness. The evaluation generated some optimistic conclusions on multilevel prevention approaches that emphasize restoration over purely retributive efforts. More experimentation with, and evaluations of, similar programmes in a variety of different social contexts, coupled with further enhancements of our empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding of the root causes of violence, may enable us to develop ever more potent and successful models for its prevention. From the perspective of public health, the programme described here represents only tertiary prevention (i.e. intervention only with those individuals who have already become sick, or in the case of violence, have already injured others), but as it is now being adapted for use in a variety of settings including in schools, it should be possible to determine whether it can also lead to primary and secondary prevention – i.e. preventing violence before it occurs in the first place.

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