



The Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) Training and Technical Assistance program developed the PSN Research in Brief series to provide a summary report of scholarly articles, studies, and publications relevant to the PSN program. This fourth issue of the PSN Research in Brief series summarizes the following study by Laceé Pappas and Amy Dent in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology*: **The 40-year debate: a meta-review on what works for juvenile offenders.**¹

BACKGROUND:

- In recent years, the media has reported on increasing juvenile crime,² although the reality such is debated.³
- Regardless of media portrayals, law enforcement agencies are working to address juvenile offenders while considering the restrictions built into juvenile justice systems.
- Many people question the ability of the juvenile and criminal justice systems to deal with youth in an effective and humane manner.
- Research and theory have focused on how to address juvenile offenders for more than 40 years.

THEORY AND PRACTICE:

- The following two models have dominated policy and practice in responding to juvenile offending:
 - Rehabilitative model: Criminal justice system involvement in preventive programs will result in positive outcomes for juvenile offenders.
 - Punitive model: Tough sentencing for juveniles will deter offending.
- This article—a meta-review—uses both systemic reviews and meta-analyses to develop findings about juvenile offenders.
 - A systemic review addresses research questions by summarizing empirical evidence using specific eligibility criteria.
 - A meta-analysis, a subset of systemic reviews, uses statistical methods to create a summary of the results of studies on a particular topic.

STUDY OUTCOMES:

- The outcome measure for the studies reviewed was juvenile recidivism after their interaction with justice systems.
- This meta-review, focused on youth in the criminal justice system, had two main goals:
 - To determine if juvenile offender intervention programs have an impact on reoffending
 - To understand what factors may affect juvenile reoffending
- The authors found that juveniles who participated in intervention programs significantly reduced their recidivism (17.4%) compared to those that did not. This finding indicates that programs for juvenile offenders are important for addressing public safety, victimization, and criminal behavior.

1 Pappas, L. N. & Dent, A. L. (2023). The 40-year debate: a meta-review on what works for juvenile offenders. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 19: 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-021-09472-z>

2 For example, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/violent-crime-rate-juvenile-11674485556>

3 <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/04/1121072142/youth-crime-is-down-but-media-often-casts-a-different-narrative>



- The models had different results based on the type of program and offenders, with the rehabilitative model showing more promise than the punitive model did:
 - Of the juveniles who participated in an intervention program, serious, violent, or sexual offenders had the strongest association with recidivism.
 - Juveniles who participated in intervention programming while incarcerated (rather than in non-institutional settings) had greater decreases in recidivism, although programming in both settings was associated with reductions in reoffending.
 - Participation in diversion, corrections, and re-entry/aftercare programs is associated significantly with decreased recidivism, although the effect is much greater for juvenile offenders who were institutionalized.
 - Juveniles who engaged in behavioral treatments (multisystemic, family-based, and cognitive), wilderness therapy, and restorative justice showed significant reductions in reoffending, with multisystemic therapy demonstrating significantly more reductions in recidivism than other types of programs did.
- The findings of this meta-review should inform practitioners and policy-makers in creating systems for juveniles that balance accountability and reintegration.