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Tracking the Impact of COVID-19 on Community-Based Intervention Programs for Justice-Involved Youth: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study

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The aim of this study is to explore the challenges facing community-based intervention programs designed for justice-involved young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted four focus groups with practitioners working in community-based intervention programs at the onset and decline of the pandemic in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021, respectively. The results suggest that there was ample preparation for programs earlier during the pandemic but that unforeseen challenges still arose. Moreover, the results obtained from the second round of focus groups, which coincided with the rollout of the vaccines, suggest that practitioners had to be creative to accomplish organizational goals during the pandemic. They also suggest that, for the sake of future practice, much can be learned from the experience of working to rehabilitate justice-involved minority youth during the pandemic. Feedback from practitioners can help identify recommendations for community-based interventions in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, community-based programs, practitioners

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Tracking the Impact of COVID-19 on Community-Based Intervention Programs for Justice-Involved Youth: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study

Over the course of two years, COVID-19 has severely impacted the justice system's ability to safeguard the public and maintain social order. Several concerns regarding the health and wellbeing of justice-involved practitioners and offenders of all ages have also emerged as central issues across justice organizations and agencies. Both justice professionals and the agencies in which they are employed have faced numerous challenges because of the pandemic's sudden emergence and the rapid spread of this infectious disease. As a result, pressured to keep their employees and the clientele they serve safe, justice systems and their stakeholders reorganized and shifted their priorities, policies, and practices to achieve their goals.

As an example, to curb the spread of the virus, secure facilities for youth and adult offenders prioritized downsizing their populations, reducing admissions, restricting visitations, and implementing safety measures to increase access to personal protective equipment (Marcum, 2020). Secure facilities also implemented various measures to improve social-distancing, education, quarantining, and data collection procedures (Barnert, 2020). In terms of law enforcement, police agencies across the country suspended training, daily roll calls, and community outreach initiatives (Jennings & Perez, 2020). Law enforcement administrators also reassigned law personnel to high-traffic areas and restricted access to departmental facilities. Along with these changes, policies shifted to include limiting the issuing of citations to low-level offenses (Stogner, Miller, & McLean, 2020).

Similar changes in agency functions have been mirrored in courts to meet the challenges wreaked by the pandemic. For instance, courts reduced in-person activities and transitioned to the use of virtual processes for adjudicating defendants and offenders. They also placed emphasis on prioritizing only the adjudication of the most serious types of cases, while diverting or dismissing altogether the less serious ones (Baldwin, Eassey, & Brooke, 2020). In conjunction with this, many courts suspended new intakes and jury trials and increased the use of plea bargaining to reduce court activity, with probation and parole agencies reacting in the same way. Immediately, these correctional agencies reduced in-person check-ins and allowed both probation and parole officers to work from home (Norton, 2020; Phillips et al., 2021; Viglione et al., 2020). Probation and parole policies were also modified to temporarily eliminate fees, limit the use of incarceration as a sanction for technical violations, and implement remote supervision (Carr, 2021; Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021).

As documented in recent research, COVID-19 has impacted justice professionals in a number of ways. Similar to the general public, justice professionals have been forced to physically distance themselves from the offenders they interact with, from their colleagues, and from the public that they have pledged to serve and protect. The overarching research question investigated the successes and challenges relative to pandemic-related innovations in service delivery for community-based programs for justice-involved youth. Specifically, we examine the functioning of community-based intervention programs in terms of fidelity, intensity, sustainability, interagency collaboration, training, staff buy-in, and assessment, among other topics, at the onset and decline of the pandemic. This study adds to the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the justice system by exploring the pandemic's effect on community-based programs that serve juvenile offenders. Equally importantly, we strive to examine the impact of

the pandemic on justice professionals and youth working in and with community-based programs.

Literature Review

A community-based program is a term that has historically been used interchangeably with terms such as community-based intervention, community-based treatment, and community-based supervision. Regardless of the language used, McLeroy et al. (2003) outlined a typology of community-based programs that covers four aspects of interventions used in the public health field, which are applicable for similar programs designed for rehabilitating or preventing delinquent or criminal behavior among young and adult offenders.

The first typology of community-based programs, *community as a setting*, refers to the geographical setting in which at-risk youth complete their rehabilitative treatment. Generally, treatment within the proximity of one's community has been consistently found to be the most effective form of treatment in reducing recidivism among justice-involved youth. Most of the research in this area compares the rehabilitative value of community-based programs to that of detention facilities. In general, these studies show that the location of rehabilitative programming matters, as at-risk youth are less likely to recidivate when participating in programming in their home communities. This finding has typically been attributed to the idea that programs located in a youth's natural setting better help them maintain and grow social bonds, whereas detention facilities isolate at-risk youth from their neighborhoods, families, schools, and peers.

The second typology of community-based programs, *community as a target*, refers to interventions that target the communities themselves. This model purports that addressing community structural conditions can effectively enable community residents to improve themselves. This definition of community-based programs is, however, not applicable to the current study, as the programs we consider focus on the rehabilitation and prevention of delinquency for youth rather than community rehabilitation.

The third typology of community-based programs, *community as an agent*, refers to programs that aim to preserve the ability of community residents to regulate and exercise informal control over their neighbors. This model of community-based programs prioritizes the community's autonomy by bolstering its social institutions so that they may meet the community members' needs without direct formal intervention. This aspect of community-based programming is sufficiently important because of the effectiveness of informal control on at-risk youth behavior.

The final model of community-based programs, *community as a resource*, views the community as an asset in the rehabilitative process. By gathering the community's existing resources, this model emphasizes the role of community participation in rehabilitating and supporting at-risk youth. For example, community-based correctional interventions such as probation cast probation officers as service brokers (Schaefer & Brewer, 2022). As a result, they implore communities to participate in the rehabilitative process for youth who are at risk or have been adjudicated delinquent by the court.

Community-based programs have long served as a staple of the social net for young justice- and non-justice-involved people, as such programs are cost-effective and useful in reducing juvenile offending and in maintaining the social connections between the youth and their families (Bontrager Ryon et al., 2013; Bontrager Ryon, Early, & Kosloski, 2017; Locke,

2017). Juvenile courts frequently dispose of their cases through the use of community-based programs, such as horticultural, counseling, substance use, mental health, sex offender, and educational programs (Abrams et al., 2011; Bumpass et al., 1985; Cammack et al., 2002; Hunter et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2009; Reese & Vera, 2007; Rijo et al., 2016). In fact, recent data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation indicate that in 2018, 69% of the adjudicated delinquency cases were disposed of through the use of community sanctioning in the form of probation, whereas the remaining 31% of their cases were disposed of through correctional facilities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).

Community-Based Program Fidelity During the Pandemic

For community-based programs to effectively prevent and reduce juvenile offending, it is important to understand the literature on effective juvenile interventions and treatment programs. A large body of work on effective correctional interventions has identified several principles of effective interventions. These principles were consolidated into a widely validated model of intervention called the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Dowden & Andrews, 2003).

The first core principle of the RNR model, *risk*, mandates that evidence-based interventions are proportionate or commensurate to an offender's risk to reoffend. This principle requires that providers accurately predict the offenders' risk using viable assessment instruments before determining which rehabilitative approach is best (Ogloff & Davis, 2004). This is a pertinent step because studies have regularly shown that there is a positive relationship between the restrictiveness of programming and delinquency. Less restrictive interventions result in a decreased likelihood of delinquency when offenders are at a low risk for recidivating. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the range of restrictiveness of community-based interventions was likely minimized, as many justice-involved youth resided at home, interacting with service providers remotely.

The second principle, *needs*, evaluates the criminogenic needs of offenders and targets them in treatment. Criminogenic needs consist of stable and dynamic risk factors that have been found to be empirically related to offending (Simourd & Hoge, 2000). This principle is sufficiently satisfied by community-based interventions, as they allow youth to reside with their families and to maintain their employment and educational progress, which are key protective factors in reducing delinquency (Bonta & Andrews, 2007).

The third core principle of the RNR model, *responsivity*, refers to the consideration of offenders' personal factors that may impede treatment. These factors include the personal attributes of the offenders (i.e., age, gender, temperament, motivation, and anxiety), promoting the idea that individualized treatment is paramount to rehabilitative success and amenability to treatment. Responsivity also addresses the "how" of rehabilitation, identifying various teaching and learning styles that have been found to be empirically effective in curbing recidivism.

Recently, two additional principles were added to the RNR model: *program integrity* and *staff buy-in*. These principles maintain that effective correctional interventions emphasize the continuity of services, agency management (i.e., training, monitoring and evaluation of programs), and collaborative relationships with other agencies and programs. Research has demonstrated that the principles of the RNR model are most effective in treating offenders when practiced in community-based settings, suggesting that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, an evaluation of such programs' adherence to these principles would be invaluable (Bonta & Andrews, 2007).

Given the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, we knew very little about the challenges that community-based providers were facing in the implementation of evidenced-based interventions with justice-involved youth. While writing this article, we learned much about serving this population. Therefore, in this study, we explore the impact of COVID-19 on community-based programs for justice-involved youth and the lessons learned over the course of a year's time. We also explore how community-based program professionals managed their roles as youth advocates for behavioral change amid the pandemic.

Method

Research Design

For this study, four focus groups were conducted via Zoom video conferencing over two time periods. The first two focus groups were conducted in October 2020, followed by the last two focus groups in April 2021. The respondents of the focus groups remained fairly consistent across both data collection time points. Each of the groups comprised 5–7 participants employed with community-based programs for at-risk or justice-involved youth in a southeastern state. Some focus group participants worked together at the same agency or collaborated with other participants prior to the focus groups. All participants were recruited on a voluntary basis after one of the authors contacted program administrators to solicit involvement. Upon volunteering to participate, the participants completed electronic consent forms outlining the research goals and objectives and collecting their demographic information. The roles of the focus group participants in their agencies ranged from administrators to direct care personnel.

In the current study, the community-based intervention programs interfaced with youth following their adjudication in local juvenile courts. As per their court-ordered dispositions, they were required to complete programming within community-based programs. Hence, the participants relied heavily on the courts to ensure the full participation of their youth. Most of the programs sought to reduce recidivism among their participants through teaching life skills and prosocial values. The programs also relied heavily on group therapy as their primary rehabilitative intervention prior to the pandemic and prided themselves on engaging heavily in community outreach, including providing transportation for youth and food and other resources for families in need during the pandemic.

While the majority of the focus group participants reported being employed with their respective agencies for over five years, a few of them had been employed for a month at the time of the first wave of focus group data collection. Attrition was considerably low between the two waves of data collection, as only one or two participants were not available to participate during the second wave of the focus groups. Before the focus groups, we again obtained consent from all the attending participants and reviewed the objectives of the study. The participants were also given an opportunity to ask questions before we proceeded with the focus groups. All focus groups were conducted by us, each lasting an hour.

Instrument

The first wave of the focus group questions assessed the program's initial preparation for the pandemic, its adherence to the RNR model during the pandemic, and, most importantly, its achievement of its outcomes. The questions for the second wave of the focus groups focused on how the practitioners, their agencies, and the involved youth adjusted to the

pandemic from the program provider's perspective, the efficacy of training, the shifts in operating procedures and service delivery methods, and the success of realizing program outcomes were discussed at length.

Data Analysis

Each focus group was audio-recorded and then later transcribed by two students. The first step in analyzing the transcripts was open coding, a process used for summarizing what respondents are initially saying about a topic (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). As a starting point, each question was analyzed across each transcript. The second author looked for similarities and dissimilarities between the responses and used them to obtain a sense of the general findings in the data. Next, focused coding was performed to identify recurring patterns in the statements provided by the respondents and form conceptual groups (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Finally, conceptual groupings were used to generate the findings for the current study. Because the two community-based programs used for the study employed different service delivery models during the pandemic (e.g., face-to-face and virtual), the findings were differentiated when relevant. In addition, when necessary, we identified where the two program types differed in their feedback.

Results

Early Stages of the Pandemic

During the first wave of the focus groups, we asked the participants to speak, in retrospect, about their agencies' adjustment to COVID-19 and the related changes to their work life and interactions with justice-involved youth. Overall, the participants identified several adjustments that were made in response to the pandemic with regard to service delivery and changes in their relationships with their colleagues, parents, and other youth. For those belonging to programs that continued to deliver face-to-face services with youth, concerns regarding physical safety and COVID-19 protocols were abundant, whereas those belonging to programs that shifted to a virtual format reported a significant loss of intimacy with the youth they served. Additionally, the participants reported that the necessity of being innovative was key to maintaining their operations during the early stage of the pandemic. They used technology, incentives (e.g., gift cards, certificates), and innovative tactics to interact with their colleagues and youth in ways that would preserve relationships and keep them involved, although they still reported that doing so was not always as effective as they would have liked.

Programs that maintained face-to-face contact with youth did so through regular visits in schools and detention centers. However, they noted that the nature of these face-to-face interactions changed due to rules around social distancing and wearing masks. For the programs that operated remotely, technology and innovation were central to keeping youth engaged. A respondent reported, "We used Kahoot!, PowerPoint, and Zoom, and we always tried to encourage the students to participate. If you participate, you get an incentive. This was done to get them more engaged."

The pandemic also impacted work life for the participants, with several of them noting that their interactions with their colleagues changed. One participant reported that most of the employees in his agency worked from home, which affected collaborations. Employee meetings moved from face-to-face to virtual. Additionally, he noted that shifts staggered as

employees determined their own brief office visits. “Some people come this time, or some people come another time. Collaborations have changed,” a participant shared.

Overall, the transition to an online service delivery model presented the respondents and their programs with a distinct set of challenges. The participants reported that converting their programs from a face-to-face delivery model to a virtual model or a model that takes precautions for the safety of youth and practitioners was a formidable task. Specifically, the participants struggled to conduct their jobs in lieu of honoring the newly established social-distancing protocols and delays in processing paperwork resulting from the remote working relationship with youth.

Respondents reported changing their methods of communicating with youth and families to “dropping information packs on the porch and doing orientation outside in lawn chairs.” Other respondents stated that they explained forms to parents and youth over the phone. They noted that it took two or three more weeks to receive the signed copies, when it previously may have taken two or three days to get them back.

Additionally, many of the participants complained that their relationships with both the youths that they served and their parents were strained as a result of the restrictions imposed upon them by the pandemic. One respondent shared, “The frustration on the staff is really, really tough. Everybody wants to have that interaction. That is how we build that relationship with those parents and strengthen what we are doing and then ask some of those honest questions.”

Along with the lack of intimacy and frustration that ensued, the participants shared suspicions that the youth and their parents used the pandemic as a cover for their inability to participate fully in their programs, even when their participation was court-ordered. For instance, a respondent stated, “It appears that they are using the fact that we cannot get in touch with them in the manner in which we normally go to their house. We pick them up from school. We don’t have problems with people not showing up.” Another respondent said, “It’s so much easier for people to say they didn’t get something in the mail like two or three times, [even though] we dropped them off on the front porch.”

To better manage operations during the pandemic, the programs provided training designed to mitigate some of the previously mentioned challenges. The participants reported that training, both virtual and in person, was frequently used at the onset of the pandemic to prepare the staff to operate within the unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic. However, the participants reported that some gaps in training were still present. Most of these gaps pertained to the need for training on the use of video conferencing technology, which would be the primary method of communication with youth. Respondents shared using webinars and training. In this respect, the participants cited that better knowing about how to use video conferencing would have been helpful in maintaining programming and stimulating youth engagement. For example, one respondent shared,

I will say there is room for improvement, just based on using this type of technology before COVID-19. So, we can probably get more hands-on training while actually using technology. For me, this is my first time getting on WebEx, just learning all the different functions of WebEx, Zoom, and Teams, as well as all kinds of things. What are those things? And what are some tips that can help other organizations with their participants to get them to participate or want to participate?

In addition to the challenges observed in connecting with colleagues and youth, the participants reported that a considerable number of their agencies’ practices have changed

because of the pandemic. These practices included changes to how youth were recruited for these programs and how, once they were recruited, risks and services were assessed. Overall, the participants reported that they evaluated youth for risks and needs similarly to how they did prior to the pandemic. They also reported that they were able to fashion creative ways to introduce their curricula to students of different learning styles, even in a virtual space.

Citing changes in assessment a respondent noted that they began using electronic forms in place of paper forms. To accommodate various learning styles, respondents used music and dance breaks during programming. Still others required students to share their screens during sessions and integrate household items in lessons. During one activity, students were required to find and integrate a puzzle in their activity. Finally, many respondents used chatrooms and assigned rotating leadership roles in virtual teams among their students into their lessons.

Further, the participants noted that with service delivery shifting to a virtual format, they worried that the youth would become fatigued with interacting with them through a computer. Therefore, they had to make a concerted effort to distinguish themselves from the schools that the youth attended virtually during the day. They were able to maintain youth engagement by being creative and offering innovative activities to set themselves apart. Another issue associated with virtual delivery was that the families of such youths were oftentimes present at home when they attended their sessions. As a result, the youth sometimes censored their involvement.

A participant detailed several ways in which they were able to successfully distinguish their programs from the youths' school programs,

We understand that students go to school six hours each day. We understand that. We get that. The program that we are trying to offer to the community is not going to be like, okay, take quizzes and take tests. It's going to be fun and interactive. When it comes to that, I don't know if students or parents see it that way. It's like, okay, is my child going to be sitting in front of a tablet or in front of a laptop for another x amount of time?

Another participant outlined additional strategies, "We have been sending out emails. We have been posting flyers, posting on social media. Hey, we got this free program. It's after school, like, come see us and see it for yourself, kind of thing."

Another respondent reported that parents' presence during sessions created awkward reactions for guardians who overheard session conversations, "And then being that it may be at home and mom, dad, whatever guardian at the house, kind of don't be starstruck when we say STD and safe sex. This is what the program is about."

The participants also identified difficulties related to forming and sustaining partnerships with other agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, they recalled having an easier time collaborating with other agencies to encourage youth to participate in their programming. As a result, they were forced to rely on parents to motivate the youth to participate. This, however, proved difficult because parents were oftentimes dealing with pandemic-related challenges of their own. "Usually, we look at it with other organizations, and now we have to work with parents. So, getting [them to participate was] a lot more difficult than working with an organization."

Despite the obstacles that their organizations faced, the participants reported that they wanted to maintain many of the practices they adopted for working with youth during the pandemic. According to them, this was an unanticipated benefit of operating during the

pandemic. They learned how to entice the interest of the youth through being innovative, and they learned how to make better use of the time and resources they had. They also learned how to integrate parents into their programming to increase the youth's participation. In light of these new practices, the participants reported that their program outcomes, which usually involved reducing recidivism and teenage pregnancy, changing lifestyle habits, involving parents, improving conflict resolution and decision-making skills, planning careers, and increasing knowledge of program topics, were maintained with even greater efficiency than before the pandemic.

Later Stage of the Pandemic

During the second wave of the focus groups, the pandemic had been in motion for a full year. Before this wave, several vaccines were approved for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration. Thus, the focus group participants were asked questions about how programming had progressed following the rollout of vaccines. In sum, the participants reported that between the rounds of data collection, several challenges had continued to persist. These challenges included communication difficulties between the participants and youth. They also reported that some unanticipated issues had arisen, such as difficulties with obtaining referrals for their programs.

According to the participants, although the training they received to keep operations intact was sufficient, it did not always help them anticipate unexpected issues associated with engaging youth remotely, "I would say it is good training, but it does not prepare you for the reality. From my perspective, it does not prepare you for all of the reality." Another participant said, "I think we got good training all along. I don't think they could have foreseen some of the things, such as how to keep in contact with our youth virtually and keep them invested in the program."

Overall, the participants reported that the pandemic had changed their agencies for the unforeseeable future. Wearing masks and social distancing were among some of the changes in daily life that were identified by the participants. Many of them anticipated that these practices can be abandoned should more people get vaccinated.

In describing the impact of the vaccine rollout, a participant said, "Some of these adjustments may be permanent. Some of them are permanent for the life of the pandemic or until, I guess, more people get vaccinated or until a change happens with the pandemic." Additional positive feedback from another participant noted that, "There are some changes that I know are probably going to stay around, like wearing your mask. They still want us to wear our masks even though people are getting vaccinated, so you know that is a change. They still want us to keep a distance six feet apart. That is another major change."

The participants also noted that they themselves had changed in terms of how they viewed their own job practices. They reported that they had learned how to perform their jobs while saving time and reducing effort. They also expressed some hope that their agencies would take note of some of the practices that worked best during the pandemic and implement them as official agency practices, "I realized that I don't have to always be sitting at my desk to get everything done. Some of it was like an 'aha' moment. You don't really have to be sitting in that space to get these many things done. So, I have done work in so many different locations. I have done work in my car, at my house, in the parking lot. I mean, I just have been able to do a lot and move quicker, too."

Respondents believed that flexible work arrangements would benefit their agencies moving forward. A respondent argued that, “Flexibility is going to be key when we get past this pandemic, particularly for staff morale. If you work four days a week at the office and one day from home, that will save you from a lot of traffic. It will also help you get some things done. You really could be productive sometimes at home versus in an office setting. So, I think this can be a plus for us as we progress into the future.”

Similar to the feedback provided during the first wave of data collection, the participants reported that there had been a loss of intimacy with their colleagues, youth, and between the youth in their programs. This oftentimes impacted rehabilitative programming in negative ways. One participant said, “Connectivity has been disrupted ... I travel 45–50 minutes just to get to my office so I can sit in the solitude of my office just to make calls and take some notes, because you miss that connection with your coworkers. Students were impacted similarly. Another participant shared, “I think it is a disadvantage when students can’t really kind of hang out together. I mean, they know the person’s name, they know that they are part of a group, and they respond, but it’s not like having real conversations.”

The physical distancing guidelines mandated by the CDC also contributed to this sense of distance between agency employees and youth. A participant lamented this observation, “When we are told, ‘Hey, you still got to be six feet apart’ or ‘Hey, you got to do all of these certain things’, this prevents us from doing what we are known for doing.”

Many of the participants reported that with the lingering of the pandemic, their programs served fewer and fewer youth. This was primarily due to the challenges getting referrals from the juvenile court system and keeping youth engaged. The participants also reported that their agencies spent less of their budget compared to before the pandemic because of the lower cost of operating remotely. However, the participants stated that the program outcomes of rehabilitating youth were still met during this period.

Another topic arose during this wave of focus groups around vaccination. The participants reported that the availability of vaccines made some youth more comfortable with returning to a near-normal lifestyle with regard to participating in their assigned community-based programs and returning to school. However, other youth were hesitant about the notion of vaccination. Even with the vaccine rollout’s mixed impact on youth and program practitioners, this did not improve the speed with which courts processed and referred justice-involved youth.

As a result, youth participation in the programs under study decreased, “I was hearing a lot about individuals who did not want to get the vaccination, who are afraid for whatever reason.” Further comments illustrated the impact of the vaccine. “So, from a psychological point of view, if someone tells you, ‘Hey, I got my shot’, now that person feels they can actually be in a building with you. You know, from a psychological standpoint, the fear factor has decreased because of the vaccines.”

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly from March 2020 through Summer 2021, presented significant challenges to everyday life for people across the globe. Youth-serving, community-based agencies were among the systems and institutions forced to reimagine their delivery of services to their stakeholders. The present study investigated the successes and challenges relative to pandemic-related innovations in service delivery for community-based

programs for justice-involved youth. Improvising during the unprecedented circumstances driven by the pandemic gave rise to several lessons learned that have implications on community-based programming for justice-involved youth moving forward.

Leveraging Virtual Service Delivery

Video conferencing and other virtual mediums of communications have become a popular collaboration tool in response to the pandemic's public health mitigation strategies. As it relates to service delivery, respondents reported the strengths and weaknesses of using video conferencing as a primary means of communication with program participants. While virtual service delivery offered flexibility for parents, effectively eliminating challenges with scheduling and transportation, building rapport and trust between service-provider and program participants became difficult. Effective therapeutic interventions require a measure of connectedness that teleconferencing software complicates. Features of the software, like the ability to disable webcams and engaging in the chat function instead of speaking audibly, potentially create barriers to facilitating the connectedness needed for effective youth programming.

Moreover, evidence supports the use of group sessions in the implementation of therapeutic interventions for youthful offenders (Arias-Pujol & Anguera, 2017). In group sessions, positive peer pressure to participate in the intervention has been found to be a key indicator of success among strong group therapeutic frameworks (Laursen, 2010). Group dynamics may be difficult to mimic in a virtual space, especially when program participants disable their webcams, preventing other participants from gleaning any positive peer pressure. Despite these challenges, the flexibility and accessibility of virtual service delivery offers promise as an alternative to face-to-face, traditional programming if the connectedness limitations can be mitigated and should be considered a powerful tool for therapeutic collaboration as the pandemic wanes. In addition to the strengths and weaknesses of virtual service delivery, another lesson learned by program practitioners during the pandemic was the importance of family-centered approaches to youth programming.

Serving Youth through their Families

The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe economic disruption on a global scale. Ethnic minorities were hit especially hard by the pandemic, representing a large percentage of front-line, essential workers unable to work from home during stay-at-home orders, while also having the most extreme COVID-related outcomes (Schwalbe and Koetzle, 2021). Additionally, minority families were faced with joblessness and housing security challenges during the pandemic at disparate rates (Nelson, 2020). These outcomes coupled with the overrepresentation of minority youth at every decision point throughout the juvenile justice system highlight the unique and dynamic needs of Black families during the pandemic. Community-based programs responded to these needs during the early stages of the pandemic by offering food distribution to youth and their families, as well as facilitating housing assistance for those displaced as a result of the economic fallout of the public health-inspired shutdowns of businesses and services. Meeting the basic needs of the family offered programs direct therapeutic access to the youth in need of services. The impact of food and housing security among youthful justice system-utilizers on successful community-based program implementation is an understudied concept but has potentially significant implications on the long-term success of youth served by these programs.

Program Outcomes

Despite the improvisation and innovation required of community-based programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, program outcomes largely remained the same. Issues with connectedness and meeting the practical needs of youth and families did not adversely impact youth-serving programs' outcomes during the pandemic. This may suggest the modality in which the intervention is offered is less of a predictor of successful program outcomes than fidelity to the evidence-based intervention itself. If program practitioners are able to harness the strengths of virtual service delivery and minimize the negative impacts of a contactless brand of human services, youth and families in need of therapeutic interventions may benefit. Further, community-based programs may be able to improve the cost-efficiency of their programs by offering virtual services, saving money on travel and other considerations.

Recommendations

The results of this study produce two primary recommendations for juvenile justice and community-based program practitioners. The first recommendation is to explore the utility of pedagogical frameworks in distance education as a guide to overcoming the challenges associated with virtual service delivery. Student engagement in online educational settings have been studied for decades, and experts in the field have developed evidence-based practices that are associated with good academic outcomes. Integrating those lessons may be helpful in overcoming challenges with connectedness and relationship development highlighted by study respondents. Because program outcomes did not seem to be impacted by the virtual implementation of evidence-based practices, addressing concerns with connectedness may make virtual service delivery within community-based interventions more viable.

The second recommendation is for the sponsoring agencies of community-based programs to prioritize flexibility and staff wellness as the pandemic concludes. Respondents discussed concerns over their own mental health during the trying and uncertain times presented by the pandemic. While comradery among program practitioners was an important consideration for respondents, the flexibility of working remotely mitigated the stress associated with being a front-line, essential worker during the shutdowns. Practitioners reported that their work productivity and the substance of their collaborations with other agencies improved during the pandemic. Community-based programs, as with the wider human services industry, often experience high levels of employee turnover. Sponsoring agencies may be able to combat challenges with turnover and low morale and improve employee retention by offering flexible work arrangements including hybrid and fully remote roles within their organizations.

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