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Criminology Research Council Report

Title: Conflict Resolution and Causal Attribution
in Adolescent Offenders

Investigators:

Associate Professor Jeff Bailey, Head, Office of Research,
University of Southern Queensland

Mrs Kath Ellerman, Head, Student Services, University of
Southern Queensland

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Summary of the Project:

This study investigated the preferred conflict resolution strategies and causal attributions of adolescent males in detention and on probation. Using thirteen carefully constructed vignettes of typical conflict situations, the respondents were asked to choose their preferred method of solving the conflict from a choice of six methods, three of which were passive and three aggressive. They were also asked to attribute the cause of one conflict incident and to indicate their interest in learning how to communicate more effectively in conflict situations.

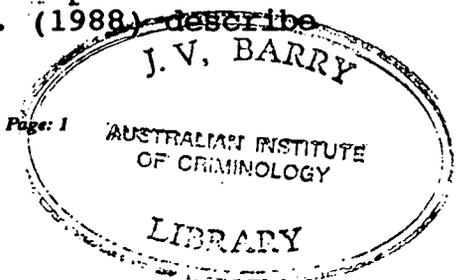
Objectives

- to determine the coping and resolution strategies young offenders prefer when dealing with conflict situations involving self, peers, family, neighbours and authority figures
- to discover to whom young offenders attribute blame in conflictual situations
- to analyze the preferences and needs of young offenders to help them improve their communicative skills

Theoretical Premise on Which the Study was Based

This study extends an earlier investigation of males in detention (Bailey and Ellerman, 1992) by refining the notion of coping and by investigating conflict resolution skills and causal attributions. Our rationale for the proposed study follows.

The literature on coping shows inconsistencies and paints a complex picture of coping skills. Compas et al. (1988) describe



the contextual variability of coping, that is, coping, like self-esteem and self-efficacy, is a skill that has situational specificity. Young offenders may be able to cope well with institutional life and intra-family conflict but their capacity to cope with stressful situations involving authority figures, work and work requirements and neighbourhood incidents may be limited. Adolescents with behavioural problems may lack both the social competence and the ability to produce a reasonable range of socially acceptable alternatives to ensure positive social outcomes in conflictual situations (Compas et al., 1988). To solve inter-personal conflict requires a range of cognitive problem solving skills, for example, a means-end awareness, a recognition of outcomes, an appreciation of socially acceptable values, an understanding of causation and an ability to respond dynamically to conflict by generating and selecting appropriate strategies (Compas, 1987).

An examination of coping includes issues such as stress, vulnerability, the relationship between temperament and strategy, the ability to take steps to resolve stressful conflicts and considerations of social competence. A definition of social competence highlights some of the concerns of the proposed study. Ford (1982, cited in Allen, Weissberg & Hawkins, 1989, p.458) describes social competence as: "the attainment of relevant social goals in specified social contexts, using appropriate means, and resulting in positive developmental outcomes." This is a useful definition because it points to the importance of context, valuing conventional social goals and selecting and using strategies that produce culturally acceptable results. When we speak of 'convention' and 'cultural acceptability,' we are referring to the culture at large, not the sub-culture in which young offenders find themselves. It is important to know which coping strategies young offenders believe are 'acceptable,' how they view fault in conflict situations and whether they wish to improve their social competence.

This study assessed the perceptions young offenders have of coping with, and resolving, conflict. It sought to make a comparison between offenders in detention and offenders previously in detention. There is no literature to support such a comparison but we believed that there could be differences between the values, attributions, and preferences for conflict resolution strategies between the populations.

Sample

Two populations were investigated, young offenders currently in detention (at Westbrook Youth Centre) and young offenders previously in detention and currently on probation in and around Toowoomba. Fifty-eight males in detention (age range 15 to 18) and thirty-eight males on probation (age range 17 to 21) were interviewed.

Instrumentation

Based on several earlier studies, it was decided that simulations would be used to investigate the young offenders' typical preferences for conflict resolution and causal attribution. For the conflict resolution section, twelve vignettes were prepared. There was one 'incident' to which the respondents were asked to specify the person or situation which caused the problem. The needs analysis covered four areas of communicating with people. The incidents, attribution situation and needs analysis were piloted with homeless adolescent youth to determine relevance of the situations and the language. The vignettes were meant to be as close to the reality of the young offenders' non-detentional lives as possible. Responses from the participants about the vignettes proved the relevance of the simulations. This was encouraging as it meant that we had increased the saliency and relevance of the experience and, hopefully, we also increased the veracity of response.

Focus of the Study

The areas of concern in the study can be identified by listing four experimental questions and six hypotheses.

Experimental Questions

- EQ₁ are the conflict solutions young offenders value positive and socially acceptable?
- EQ₂ to which participant (victim or perpetrator) do young offenders characteristically attribute blame for conflict?
- EQ₃ can young offenders select positive, effective conflict resolution strategies?
- EQ₄ what communicative skills do young offenders believe they should develop to improve their ability to avoid and resolve conflict?

Hypotheses

- H₁ there are no significant differences between the conflict resolution strategies selected by young offenders in detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention.
- H₂ there are no significant differences between the causal attributions of conflict by young offenders in detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention.
- H₃ there are no significant differences between the preferred conflict resolution strategies chosen by young offenders in

detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention.

- H₄** there are no significant differences in conflict resolution strategies, attributions and needs between the young offenders in detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention based on intra-personal understandings.
- H₅** there are no significant differences in conflict resolution strategies, attributions and needs between the young offenders in detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention based on inter-personal understandings of (a) peers, (b) family, (c) neighbours and (d) authority figures.
- H₆** there are no significant differences in conflict resolution strategies, attributions and needs between the young offenders in detention compared to young offenders previously but not currently in detention based on preferred conflict resolution strategies.

Results

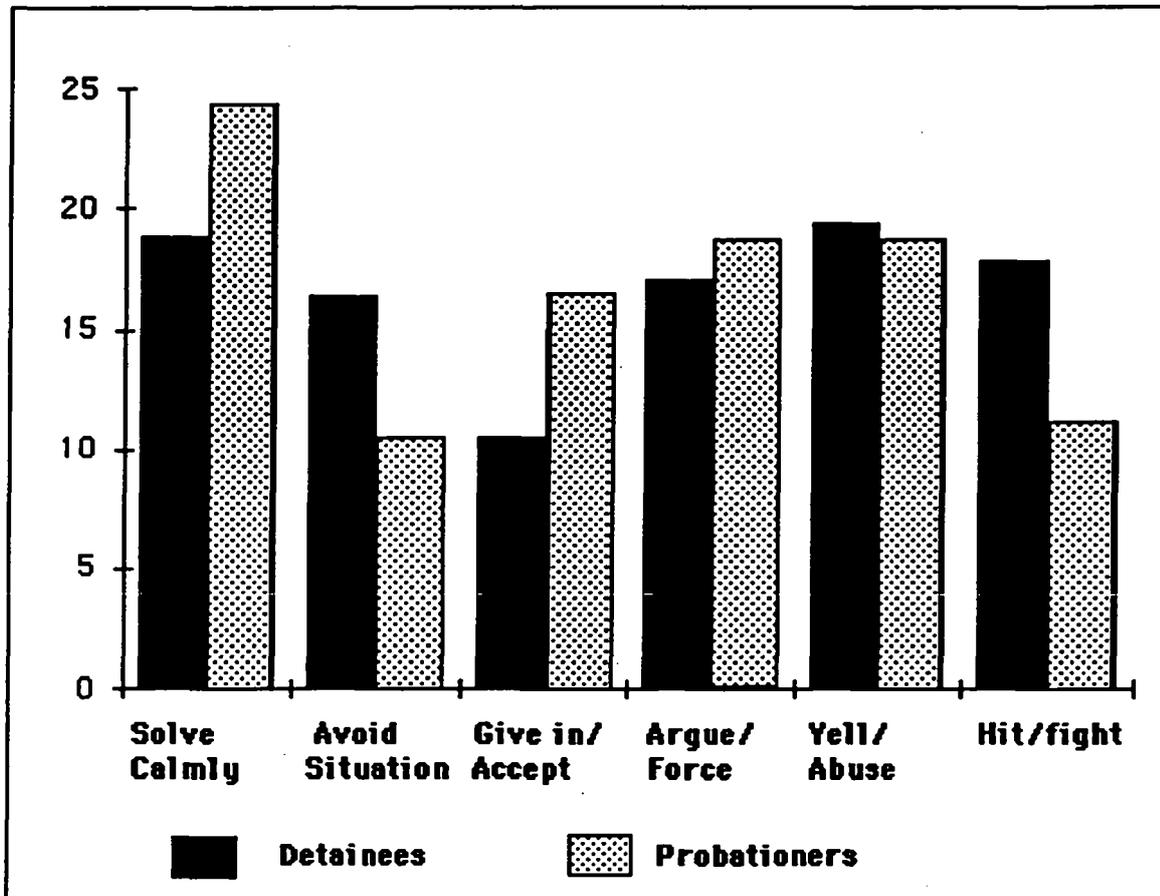
It should be noted that final analyses have not been conducted and verified. The results which follow are indicative. Table 1 shows the totals and, more importantly, the percentage of preferences detainees and probationers showed to the twelve incidents. If one accepts that the first three choices (Solve Calmly, Avoid the Situation and Give in/accept) are 'passive' strategies, then one notices that 45.7% of the detainees and 51.5% of the probationers preferred passive techniques to solve conflict. The difference between the two groups is interesting, the probationers choosing more passive means. This finding could be attributed to the maturity of the probationers and/or to lessons learned in probation. It might also represent the difference people feel when they are incarcerated or free.

**Table 1: Summary of Conflict Resolution Choices
for
Detainees and Probationers**

Group	Solve Calmly	Avoid the Situation	Give in/ Accept	Argue/ Force	Yell/ Abuse	Hit/ Fight
<u>Detainees</u>						
TOTAL	131	114	73	119	135	124
Percentage	18.8	16.4	10.5	17.1	19.4	17.8
<u>Probationers</u>						
TOTAL	111	48	75	85	85	51
Percentage	24.4	10.5	16.5	18.7	18.7	11.2

The following bar-chart summarizes Table 1 in graphic form.

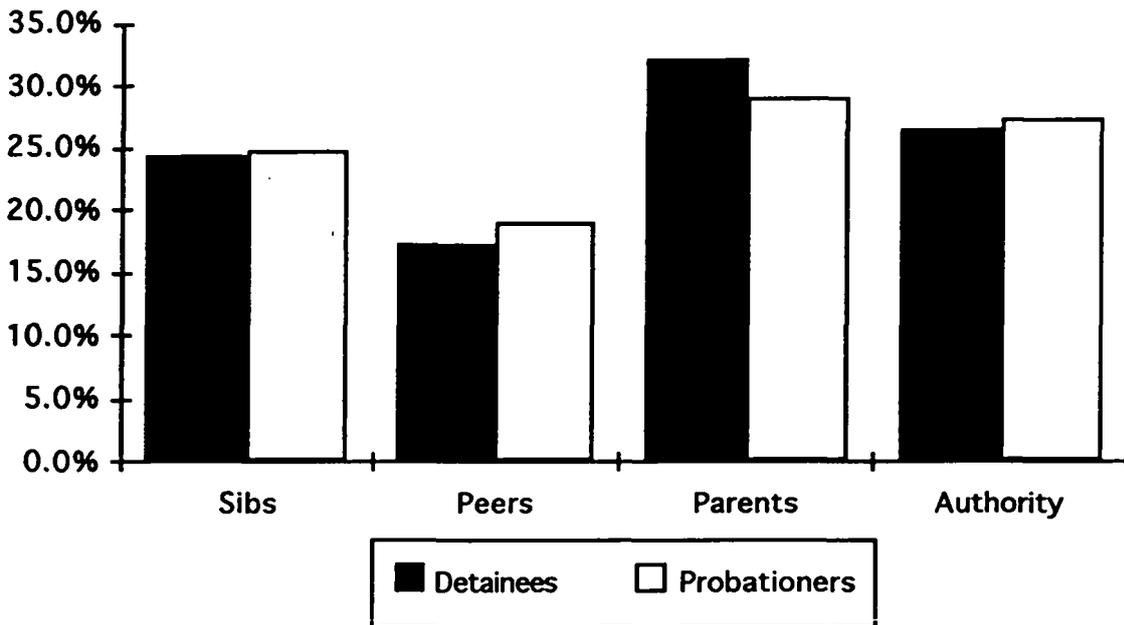
Figure 1: Comparison of Conflict Resolution Preferences (by %) for Detainees and Probationers



It is immediately obvious that adolescents on probation give a higher value to solving conflict calmly and accepting the situation than do youth in detention. It is likely that the detention setting makes respondents more aggressive, although the incidents were about 'outside' events. Youth in detention report a greater preference for avoiding a situation and they also have a higher preference for using physical means to solve their problems than do those males on detention studied.

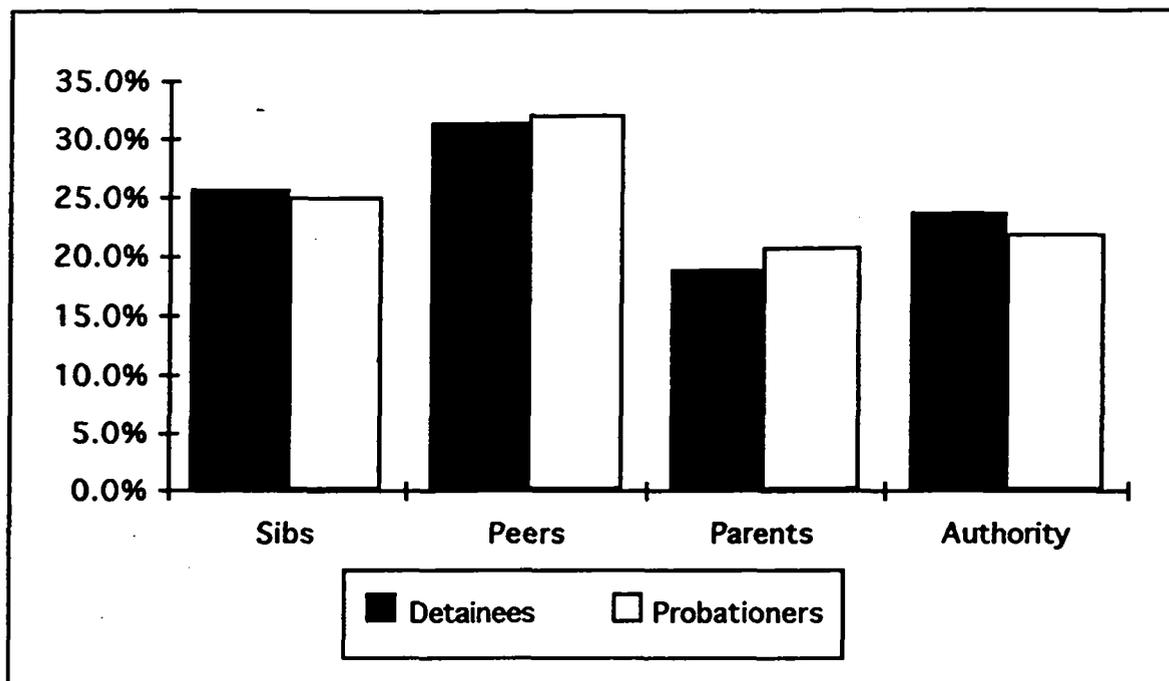
The next two charts highlight the difference in conflict resolution preferences by 'passive' and 'aggressive' choices for the two groups.

Figure 2: Comparison of Passive Conflict Resolution Preferences (by %) for Detainees and Probationers



The differences here are minimal, which is surprising. Regardless of whether one is currently in detention, or has been in detention but is now out, the respondents make the same choices. Another way of viewing the data is to look at the differences between the reference groups. There is, for example, a greater preference for peaceful resolution with parents and authority figures than for peers.

**Figure 3: Comparison of
Aggressive Conflict Resolution Preferences (by %)
for
Detainees and Probationers**



The same pattern is evident in Figure 3 as was demonstrated in Figure 2. There are no appreciable differences in conflict resolution preferences for the four reference groups for the detainees and the probationers. Figure 3 is the inverse of Figure 2, with fewer aggressive preferences for parents and authority figures, with peers being the group for whom aggressive measures are more highly valued.

Causal Attributions

The questionnaire used was modelled on that of Russell and McAuley (1986) in which a nine item scale measured locus of causality (items 1, 5 and 7), stability (items 3, 6 and 8) and controllability (items 2, 4 and 9). The scale ranged from 1 to 9 with descriptors at each end of the scale. A typical example of the bi-polar description is: "says something about you; says something about the situation." The scores for questions 5, 6 8 and 9 were reversed. High scores indicate that, to a very large extent, the respondent believed that it was not his fault but someone else's (locus), that the condition was

virtually permanent and immutable (stability) and that he had no control over the outcome (controllability).

Table 2 shows that the means for both groups were virtually identical and that the lowest level of positive effect that adolescents in detention felt was in the area of stability, that is, regardless of what one does, these events will occur anyway. This attribution is akin to learned helplessness and may be taken to mean that adolescents in trouble with the justice system believe that regardless of what they do, things will go wrong. To improve the relevance of these data and conclusions, it would be valuable to have a matched sample of adolescent males not having problems with the justice system to make their attributions on the same scale.

Table 2: Summary of Causal Attribution Means for Adolescents in Detention and on Probation

	Locus	Control	Stability	Total
Probation	4.2	4.4	3.8	4.1
Detention	4.2	4.3	3.8	4.0

Needs Analysis

Respondents were asked four questions: how to ask adults for help without appearing stupid (Skill 1); body language (Skill 2); expressing anger to an adult in socially acceptable ways (Skill 3); how to accept blame (Skill 4). The level of interest was: not interested (1); some interest (2); fairly interested (3); very interested (4).

Table 3: Summary of Needs Analysis Preferences (by %) for Total Population

SKILL	No Interest	Some Interest	Fair Interest	Very Great Interest
1	13.5	32.3	35.4	18.8
2	13.5	20.8	39.6	26.1
3	15.8	23.2	32.6	28.4
4	24.0	14.6	28.1	33.3

The preceding table shows clearly the level of interest in learning communication skills to solve inter-personal problems and to improve capacity to deal effectively with situations where effective communication is required. When one totals Fair and Very Great interest, it is noted that 54% would want to know more about asking for help without appearing stupid, 66% about body language, 61% about expressing anger in a socially acceptable way and 61% about accepting blame. This is

a very positive outcome which demonstrates that young adolescents in the juvenile system do want to develop skills which should help them get out of this system.

Table 4 shows the percentages for the two groups for each of the four needs analysis skills. A review of the average percentage for each group for the four skills shows a remarkable degree of homogeneity in their preferences. In fact, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of their expressed preference for skill improvement in communication.

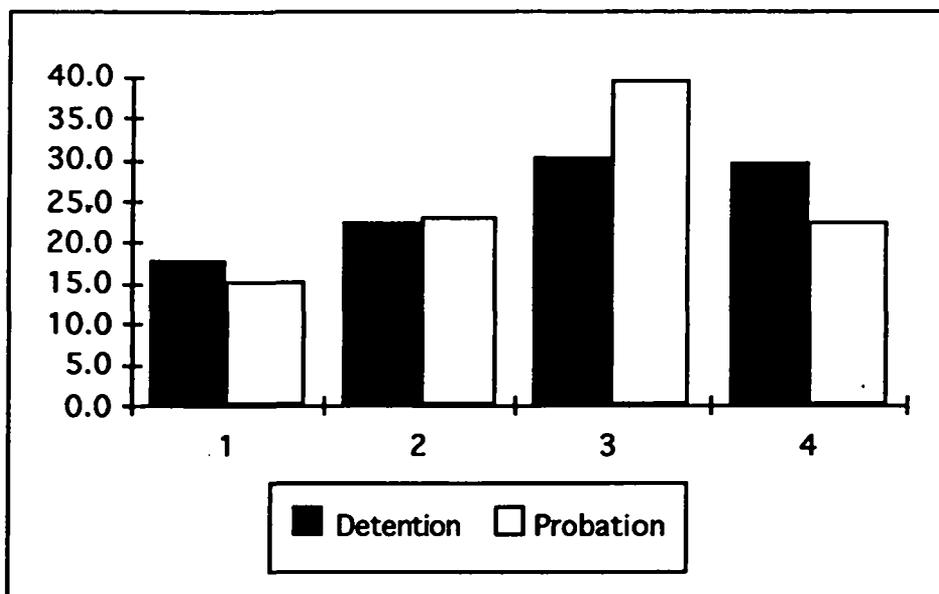
Table 4: Comparison of Needs Analysis Preferences (by %) by Adolescents in Detention and on Probation

SKILL	Not Det%²	Not Prob%	Some Det%	Some Prob%	Fair Det%	Fair Prob%	Great Det%	Great Prob%
1	15.6	10.5	31.0	34.2	31.0	42.1	22.4	13.2
2	13.8	13.2	22.4	18.4	37.9	42.1	25.9	26.3
3	15.8	15.8	21.0	26.3	29.9	36.8	33.3	21.1
4	25.9	21.1	15.5	13.2	22.4	36.8	36.2	28.9
Average	17.8	15.2	22.5	23.0	30.3	39.5	29.5	22.4

¹ Level of interest - Not interested, Some Interest, Fair Interest, Very Great Interest

² Det% is the percentage of Detainees expressing interest while Prob% refers to the percentage of probationers interested.

Figure 4: Comparison of Needs Analysis Preferences (by %) for Adolescents in Detention and on Probation



The figures 1, 2 3 and 4 refer to the level of interest, for example, 1 is Not Interested.

The conclusion to be drawn from this needs analysis is that a very large percentage of males in conflict with the justice system want to develop skills which will improve their capacity to communicate effectively and in more socially acceptable ways.

Reporting on the Study

At the time of this report, not all the analysis and write-up has been completed. The foregoing summary gives a brief overview of some of the important outcomes. The study is being reported in two parts: conflict resolution preferences; and causal attributions and communications needs. The title of the articles, the intended outlet and the abstracts are shown below. These articles will be submitted early in 1993. When published, copies will be sent to the Criminology Research Council.

**Conflict Resolution Preferences and Causal Attributions of
Young Male Offenders**

Jeff Bailey and Kath Ellerman

Abstract

Using carefully constructed critical incidents involving conflictual situations between the respondents and peers, siblings, parents and authority figures, this study aimed to investigate young male offenders' preferences for conflict resolution and their attributions for the cause of conflict. The instrumentation consisted of twelve incidents to test conflict resolution preferences and one incident to determine locus, stability and controllability of causation. Two male offending populations were included in the study. The first was 58 mid-adolescent males in detention and the second was 38 older adolescent males on probation.

Conflict resolution preferences were classified as passive or aggressive. In both populations, the preferences for each type were approximately evenly divided. Probationers tended to adopt more compromising methods and less physically aggressive strategies than Detainees. Both groups placed a high priority on passive solutions with the parents. In situations involving peer conflict, particularly direct challenges from peers, the preferred solution was usually aggressive and mostly physical.

With regard to causal attributions, there are no differences in the attributions made by adolescents in detention or on probation. Despite the absence of benchmark data from adolescent males not involved with the justice system, it appears that the detainees and probationers attribute the cause of accidents to external sources, feel they have very little control over such events and view the regular occurrence of these mishaps as inevitable.

For submission to Youth Studies

Communication Needs of Young Males in Detention and on Probation

Jeff Bailey and Kath Ellerman

Adolescents in detention are often reported as having low levels of literacy, communication and social skills. This study consisted of a needs analysis of communication for young male adolescents in detention and older previous offenders on probation.

The respondents were asked to express their level of interest in learning more about four areas of communication: how to ask adults for help without appearing stupid; body language; expressing anger to an adult in socially acceptable ways; how to accept blame; The level of interest was: not interested; some interest; fairly interested; very interested.

The results showed no difference between adolescents in detention or on probation for their need to improve communication. Approximately 60% of the population expressed a Fair or Very Great degree of interest in learning more about communicating effectively. It is recommended that further needs analyses be undertaken, that the communication skills of adolescents in detention be improved and that the effects of this improvement be measured in terms of future conflicts with the justice system.

Conclusion to the Report

In conclusion, this study has proved to be useful in providing a methodology to examine the psychological make-up offenders and it has yielded some useful insights into how young offenders view the world. It is clear that they have a mixed approach to solving conflict, with immediate resort to physical strategies with peers, but with more passive approaches to authority figures and, particularly to parents. In terms of how they deal with conflict, there are few noticeable differences between youth in detention and youth on probation. Certainly, the older group appeared to be more willing to compromise but the preferred choices for resolving arguments are still quite aggressive and socially maladaptive.

In terms of attributing causes to incidents, both populations are virtually identical. They express a moderate level of acceptance of the problem but some data suggest that these youth feel they have little control over events. There is a definite need to follow this conclusion through, particularly to determine whether, through courses and counselling, it is possible to change this attitude.

Finally, the needs analysis showed that all these offenders are keen to learn how to cope with their emotions and how to communicate with others in ways which will enhance acceptance and mutual respect.

The lesson for the research team is that these offenders and probationers are very similar in many ways. The effect of detention does not seem to have changed the basic way they see life, particularly how they view conflict situations. Even though offenders do not accept blame readily and feel they cannot control events in their lives, they are keen to change and improve. Another continuing problem is the influence of inappropriate methods of solving conflict, accurately assessing blame and knowing how to communicate effectively on the offenders' success in gaining and maintaining employment. It is likely that their communicative and social skills will continue to cause problems for them in vocational opportunities. Finally, there is a serious concern with the literacy of young offenders. While this problem is recognized by most juvenile justice researchers, and while it was not the concern of this study, it is important to understand the extent of literacy problems and the impact of low levels of literacy on the self-concept and employability of offenders. If they lack the basic skills required to function effectively in the mainstream of society, it is clear that young offenders will always be marginalised. Marginalisation engenders a commitment to values which are inimical to full acceptance by society and which will ensure that these offenders maintain patterns of behaviour which will ultimately cause them to re-offend.

This study lends encouragement to the corrective services system to take advantage of the opportunity to improve the communicative and social capacities of offending youth. Such programs, if effectively implemented, should mean that these youth will reduce their current socially unacceptable ways of dealing with conflict. The likelihood is, of course, that maintenance of inappropriate communicative and social behaviour will bring these youth to the attention of the justice system repeatedly. If these premises are correct, the continuing lack of communicative facility and social skills may prove to be decisive factors in recidivism in young Australian males.

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