

Alternative education programmes

Programmes for young people who don't participate in traditional education.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Mixed findings	 Strong	 Moderate	 Moderate	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Alternative education programmes are designed for young people who are unable or unwilling to participate in traditional education, perhaps if they have been excluded or are subject to exclusion. The programmes are delivered through state or private schools.

Alternative education programmes are designed for students with attendance or disciplinary problems. They are offered within alternative schools and focus on small school and class sizes, have student-centred curriculums and individualised learning plans.

The success of these programmes is measured on the basis of individual achievements, rather than being compared to the rest of the class, theoretically creating more relaxed environments for learning.

This narrative is based on one review of 57 studies. The crime related outcome measured was a reduction in delinquency, which was either self-reported offending or from official data such as police contacts and juvenile court records. All of the studies were based on evidence from the USA.

Effect – how effective is it?

There is some evidence that alternative education programmes have either increased or reduced crime, but overall they have not had a statistically significant effect on crime.

When the authors calculated an overall effect size using 13 studies, no statistically significant difference in rates of delinquency was found between treatment and control groups.

Four of the 13 individual studies reported statistically significant reductions in delinquency, and two reported statistically significant increases. Seven studies found no significant differences in the rates of delinquency between treatment and control groups.

The review did find small statistically significant overall positive effects on attitude towards school and self-esteem by those who were in treatment groups compared to control groups.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The review had an effective search strategy and used multiple authors to collect information from the primary studies to ensure accuracy. However, the review did not take into account the potential effect that statistical outliers may have in increasing or decreasing the stated effect sizes.

The authors noted that the individual studies suffered from some shortcomings, including:

- a lack of experimental research designs with random allocation to treatment and control groups
- lack of extended follow-up to assess outcomes

Mechanism – how does it work?

The review suggests alternative education programmes work to reduce delinquency by altering a number of variables believed to be causally linked to delinquent behaviour, including school attendance, attitude towards school and self-esteem.

The review noted that alternative schools have a number of characteristics designed to create a more positive learning environment. These characteristics include:

- a lower ratio of students or children to teachers
- less structured classroom environments
- less competitive performance assessments
- a focus on teaching and instruction that is set at a pace suitable to the individual student.

These differences from normal educational approaches are thought to make students more comfortable and more motivated to attend school, which:

- creates more positive attitudes towards school
- improves school attendance
- increases academic performance and self-esteem
- leads to decreased delinquent behaviours

The review found small but statistically significant increases in positive attitudes towards school and self-esteem among those who received alternative education programs.

They did not test whether these variables had an effect upon the rates of delinquency in participants, however.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

Half of the studies failed to give information about the intensity or duration of the programmes. Many did not detail information about participant attributes, making it difficult to analyse whether these had an effect upon rates of delinquency in the programmes.

Within the review, a variety of contextual factors that could impact upon the recipients of alternative education programmes were considered, but not specifically for delinquency as an outcome.

The authors calculated a composite overall effect size, which included delinquency, school performance, attitude towards school and self-esteem. They found that while ethnicity and age had no effect, the targeted population did.

The evidence suggests that programmes targeted towards specific populations – for example, low school achievers and delinquents – showed significantly higher positive effects compared to more generic programmes not tailored for any particular population.

Review authors suggest that the success of specific alternate programmes might be explained by the fact that they were structured around the particular needs of the population.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review noted a number of factors that must be considered when implementing alternative education programmes.

While there are no standard models for alternative schools, they do share a number of factors to create a more positive learning environment, including:

- lower ratio of students to teachers than in conventional schools
- less structured classroom environments, focusing on non-competitive performance assessments
- individualised teaching and instruction at a pace that is suitable to each student or child

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not provide any information on the costs of alternative education programmes, or conduct a cost-benefit analysis.

General considerations

- The review is 20 years old, so more recent evidence that has not yet been synthesised may provide different outcomes.
- The authors stated that there is little consensus regarding the appropriate population for these programmes.

Summary

There is some evidence that alternative education programmes have either increased or reduced crime, but overall they have not had a statistically significant effect on crime.

While they have not had an effect on rates of delinquency, participants in the programmes have shown significant positive increases in self-esteem and attitudes towards school.

Alternative schools are designed to create positive learning environments, which encourage school attendance and increased performance. This may lead to increased self-esteem and decreased levels of delinquency.

Alternative schools, which target low achievers and delinquents, had greater overall positive effects on participants than schools with no particular target audience.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Cox, S. M., Davidson, W. S. and Bynum, T. S. (1995) '[A Meta-Analytic Assessment of Delinquency-Related Outcomes of Alternative Education Programs](#)', Crime and Delinquency, 41:2, 219-234

Summary prepared by

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