A National Profile of the Status of Public Recreation Services for At-Risk Children and Youth

Lorina Espericueta Schultz
John L. Crompton
Peter A. Witt

ABSTRACT: The study provides a national profile of the extent, gestation, and nature of at-risk youth programs in recreation and park agencies; the goals agencies have established for these programs; agency resource allocations to these programs; and the extent and nature of collaborative arrangements with other organizations. Among the 628 responding agencies (63% response rate), 55% targeted some portion of their programs to include at-risk children and youth. Within this group, 61% offered specifically targeted separate programs, while the other 39% reported that this population was served as part of an overall program without separate programs being offered. Seventy-two percent of the communities offering separate programs have initiated these efforts since 1989. Programs mainly focused on prevention for potential at-risk children and youth. In order to undertake services, agencies were involved in a wide variety of collaborative efforts with the business community, foundations, voluntary agencies, school districts, and law enforcement agencies. Where separate programs were offered, approximately 14% of the agencies' program budgets were devoted to serving at-risk children and youth. The average cost of serving a child for a year was approximately $169.

KEYWORDS: At-risk children and youth, municipal recreation services, recreation services

AUTHORS: Lorina Espericueta Schultz is a recreation programmer with the city of Cedar Falls, Texas; John L. Crompton and Peter A. Witt are professors in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University.

For as long as recreation has been institutionalized as a public service, it has been argued by the field's evangelists that it can be an effective tool for alleviating delinquency and crime (Crompton, 1993, p. 4).

Introduction
The origins of public recreation services emerged in the late 1800s in response to negative social conditions in many major cities, and a humanistic concern for the welfare of those who found themselves with few resources,
places to recreate, and/or skills to undertake recreational activities. The comments made by Jane Addams in 1893 are reminiscent of those made by commentators today:

The social organism has broken down through large districts of our great cities. Many of the people living there are very poor, the majority of them without leisure or energy for anything but the gain of subsistence. They move often from one wretched lodging to another. They live for the moment side by side, many of them without knowledge of each other, without fellowship, without local tradition or public spirit, without social organization of any kind. Practically nothing is done to remedy this. The people who might do it, who have the social tact and training, the large houses, and the traditions and custom of hospitality, live in other parts of the city. The clubhouses, libraries, galleries, and semi-public conveniences for social life are also blocks away. (p. 4)

Children were often left with no safe, constructive places to play; prostitution, alcohol abuse, and delinquent acts were a problem among the young and adults alike. In response to these conditions, Settlement Houses, parks, playgrounds, gymnasias, libraries, and recreation programs were developed. Much of the initial response came through philanthropy, but subsequently it was institutionalized through the involvement of local government.

However, during the third quarter of the 20th century, recreation and park agencies steadily evolved away from their historical roots of serving the disadvantaged. They moved from a social service orientation concerned with alleviating social ills associated with the disadvantaged, to the cause of recreation for all. In the late 1970s and 80s, taxpayer revolts, oil embargoes, reductions in federal grant programs, increased competition for funds from other public services, and increased maintenance costs, forced many departments that served multiple segments of the public to focus on efficient service production.

The prevailing concern of elected officials was to reduce the tax investment in park and recreation services. Thus, agencies concentrated either on providing services for which fees could be charged so lower tax subsidies would be needed, and/or on terminating or curtailing services that did not generate revenue and which received substantial tax support. These efforts to reduce reliance on tax subsidy were successful. In 1974-75 self-generated revenues constituted 14.2% of total local expenditures on park and recreation services, but by 1987-88 this had increased to 24% (Crompton & McGregor, 1994). Unfortunately, many gains in self-sufficiency were at the expense of equity. Raising fees and terminating heavily subsidized activities resulted in declines and in some cases the demise of services for economically disadvantaged groups, and a strong orientation to serving a middle class clientele.

A major shift occurred over time in the interpretation of what was meant by equity (Crompton & Wicks, 1988). The field’s initial modus operandi was
compensatory equity, which required that most recreation resources be allocated to the economically disadvantaged. In the 1950s, 60s and early 70s, public recreation was increasingly viewed in egalitarian terms, as a right to which everybody should have access. Following this notion of equity, equal allocations of resources were made across communities irrespective of economic standing. This resulted in more services being directed at middle class clienteles. Finally, in the late 1970s and 1980s there was a further shift towards market equity, which directed that services should be allocated to those who pay for them.

This shift from compensatory equity to market equity appeared to have abated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Crompton and McGregor (1994) reported that the percentage of self-generated revenue of park and recreation budgets started to decline in 1988-89. Articles began to appear asking “What business are we really in?” (Schultz, McAvoy & Dustin. 1988; Sessoms, 1992) which challenged the shift from a social service to a revenue orientation.

In the last few years, there has been a growing momentum manifested by writers in the field, the pronouncements of elected officials and concerns expressed by the general public, which is reflective of the issues that initiated recreation as a public service over 100 years ago. The National Commission on Children (1991) summarizes these issues:

If we measure success not just by how well most children do, but by how poorly some fare, America falls far short. One in four children is raised by just one parent. One of every five is poor. Half a million are born annually to teenage girls who are ill prepared to assume the responsibilities of parenthood. An increasing number are impaired before birth by their parents’ substance abuse. Others live amid violence and exploitation, much of it fueled by a thriving drug trade. Rich and poor children alike face limited futures when their educations are inadequate and they have few opportunities for cultural enrichment and community service. Too many children at every income level lack time, attention, and guidance from parents and other caring adults. The result is often alienation, recklessness, and damaging, antisocial behavior. (pp. xviii)

Today, attention is again being focused on the need to develop services (including recreation services) that alleviate both the causes and consequences of these problems for children and youth who are perceived to be at-risk. Some recreation and park professionals have responded to public and political pressures by reevaluating their patterns of operation and seeking to demonstrate that their efforts have value in contributing to alleviating these issues. They have recognized that “returning to the original understanding of the mission by demonstrating the value of parks and recreation to the resolution of social ills…” (Sessoms, 1993, p. 8) is a key to finding new vitality for the field.

Although there appears to be increasing interest in providing recreation services for at-risk children and youth, evidence of this is primarily anecdotal.
The study reported here was devised to rectify this limitation by developing a national profile of:

1. the extent, gestation, and nature of at-risk youth programs in recreation and park agencies;
2. the goals agencies have established for these programs;
3. agency resource allocations to these programs; and
4. the extent and nature of collaborative arrangements with other organizations.

The study was intended to contribute to a better understanding of services directed at at-risk children and youth in a national sample of recreation and park agencies. It was also anticipated that the study would provide a benchmark for charting future changes in the extent, intent and strategies of efforts addressed at this target group. In addition, it was hoped that demonstrating the level of commitment and investment of agencies involved with this work, may help convince skeptical policy makers that recreation services can play a positive role in addressing some of the problems with which cities of all sizes are confronted in dealing with children and youth at-risk.

**Methods**

*Instrument Development*

A questionnaire comprised of open and close-ended questions was developed to gather information. An initial draft was constructed with input from several practitioners involved in programming for at-risk youth, staff of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), and faculty and graduate students at a major university. After three drafts and several reviews by the project staff, the survey was pretested by distributing it to a total of 30 individuals comprised almost equally of recreation and park graduate students, recreation and park directors from different parts of the United States, and recreation and park professors from a variety of academic institutions. This pretest group was provided with a survey and a cover letter stating the purpose and objectives of the study. Each was asked to review the questions to ensure that (a) they would be understandable to those receiving the questionnaire; and (b) respondents were likely to be able to provide the requested information. Adjustments were made to the instrument based on responses from 26 individuals who responded to the pretest survey.

*Data Collection*

Data were collected from three populations. The primary population was comprised of the 955 recreation and park agencies from across the nation that were agency members of NRPA. A second population comprised Texas recreation and park agencies in cities with populations over 50,000. If these agencies were already in the original sample, they were not duplicated. Finally, a third population consisted of recreation and park agencies located in the 100 largest cities in the United States that were not included in the original or Texas samples. After removing overlap among the three groups the final number of
surveys mailed was 1,017. While the agencies surveyed were not taken from a random sample of all possible park and recreation agencies in the United States, it was felt that the sample represented a sufficiently large proportion of the possible agencies that it was likely to offer a reasonably good representation of the population as a whole.

Primary data were collected through a mail survey. An adaptation of the Total Design Method (TDM) developed by Dillman (1978) was used in the design and implementation of the mail survey. The mail-outs were sent first class through regular postal service. They consisted of the survey and a cover letter written by the Executive Director of NRPA emphasizing the importance of the study. A second mail-out was done two weeks after the initial mailing. Two weeks after the second mail-out, reminder phone calls began to agencies that had yet to respond; calls were completed over a two week period. Agencies agreeing to respond to the instrument were asked if they needed another survey sent to them. Those answering yes were mailed another packet of materials, which constituted the third mail-out.

There were 16 undeliverable surveys, so the effective sample number was reduced to 1001. A total of 661 usable questionnaires were returned, representing an overall response rate of 66%. Because population size was a critical variable used in the analysis of responses, the number of usable questionnaires was reduced by 33 owing to missing information for this variable. Thus, the number of questionnaires available for most of the analyses was 628.

Data were coded for all questions and entered in the computer for analysis. Respondents were classified *ex post facto* into one of four population categories: agencies in jurisdictions with 25,000 or less; 25,001 to 75,000; 75,001 to 250,000; 250,001 and up (largest 13 million). The categories were selected in order to yield approximately the same number of jurisdictions in each cohort, although the smallest cohort had a slightly disproportionate number of jurisdictions assigned to it.

**Results and Discussion**

*The Extent of Services and Nature of Programs*

Among the responding agencies, 55% targeted some portion of their programs to include at-risk children and youth (TARGET Group). Agencies from larger jurisdictions were more likely to target programs (table 1). The 45% of respondents who did not target programs to include at-risk children and youth (NOT TARGET Group) were instructed not to fill out the questionnaire beyond the initial few questions. The results and discussion reported here are based on responses from the TARGET group only.

Within the TARGET group, 61% offered specifically targeted separate programs (TARGET-SEPARATE Group), while the other 39% reported that this population was served as part of an overall program without separate programs being offered (TARGET-INCLUDE Group). Agencies in the two larger cohorts were significantly more likely to be in the TARGET-SEPARATE group (table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>0 to 25,000</th>
<th>25,001 to 75,000</th>
<th>75,001 to 250,000</th>
<th>250,001 to 13,000,000</th>
<th>Overall percent</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does agency target any of its programs to include at-risk children and youth?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not target any at-risk children and youth programs (NOT-TARGET)</td>
<td>129 (63.2%)</td>
<td>78 (40.8%)</td>
<td>24 (32.0%)</td>
<td>34 (30.6%)</td>
<td>280 (44.6%)</td>
<td>Target by population = .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target services for at-risk children and youth (TARGET)</td>
<td>75 (36.8%)</td>
<td>112 (59.2%)</td>
<td>83 (67.5%)</td>
<td>76 (60.4%)</td>
<td>345 (55.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If target programs, does agency offer separate programs for at-risk children and youth?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers separate programs (TARGET–SEPARATE)</td>
<td>34 (45.3%)</td>
<td>62 (55.4%)</td>
<td>61 (73.5%)</td>
<td>55 (72.4%)</td>
<td>212 (61.3%)</td>
<td>Separate programs by population = .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not offer separate programs (TARGET–INCLUDE)</td>
<td>41 (54.7%)</td>
<td>50 (44.6%)</td>
<td>22 (26.5%)</td>
<td>21 (27.6%)</td>
<td>133 (38.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Attendance Figures (n of TARGET programs)</td>
<td>(69)</td>
<td>(94)</td>
<td>(74)</td>
<td>(65)</td>
<td>(302)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer/week</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>1101</td>
<td>7624</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer/week/1000 population</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/week</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>1027</td>
<td>3617</td>
<td>1091</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/week/1000/population</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When Programs Began

Only 28% of the TARGET-SEPARATE agencies started offering programs in or before 1989. Another 31% of the agencies began targeting programs from 1989 to 1991 and the remaining 41% began targeting programs since then. Sixty-eight percent of agencies serving the largest jurisdictions (>250,000 population) began targeting programs before 1988; almost half the agencies in the smallest jurisdictions (<25,000) began programs between 1989-1991; and over half the agencies in jurisdictions with populations from 25,000 to 250,000 began targeting programs since 1992.

The data indicated that in each of the four population cohorts there were a few agencies with a long history of targeting and offering separate programs, but the mean responses indicate that most agencies started offering separate programs within the past six or seven years. This does not necessarily define, however, when these agencies perceived at-risk children and youth to be a definitive part of their service effort. It is possible that agencies formerly offered programs that included at-risk children and youth, but only recently targeted this group or developed differentiated programs for them. It may be conjectured that an earlier focus may have been based on a philosophy of mainstreaming, which argued that integration of these individuals with normal youth was likely to yield better results than developing separate programs for them. If this were the case, it would partially explain the recent emergence of separate programs. This mainstreaming philosophy was articulated by a respondent who stated:

Our department makes every effort to provide a variety of activities and programs to accommodate all people. We do not isolate or discriminate groups of people. Our department has the flexibility to offer activities and programs at a minimal cost or no cost to patrons. The staff is informed and instructed to be conscious and attentive to participants that may require special needs. Our programs are not designed to target any specific at-risk group, but we attempt to address and include a diversified patronage. We do not categorize, label or alienate participants into specific groups (low income, single parents, behavioral problems, etc.) Nor do we allocate or identify specific money to certain groups or individuals.

The recent expanded number of separate programs has occurred in response to a number of factors, one of which is an increase in gangs in many communities. Fifty-seven percent of both the TARGET-SEPARATE and TARGET-INCLUDE jurisdictions indicated that gangs were perceived to be a problem by residents in their jurisdictions, with agencies in the two largest population cohorts indicating significantly more citizen concern than those in the smaller population cohorts (table 2). Large jurisdictions also reported they had more gangs and more gang members, but when these figures were transformed and expressed in terms of gangs per 1,000 population and gang members per 10,000 population, jurisdictions in the smallest population cohort reported an average of 2.2 gangs per 10,000 population compared with 1.1
Table 2
Number of Gangs and Perceptions of Gangs as a Problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>0 to 25,000</th>
<th>25,001 to 75,000</th>
<th>75,001 to 250,000</th>
<th>250,001 to 13,000,000</th>
<th>Overall percent</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gangs perceived to be a problem? (% Yes)</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARGET--SEPARATE</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARGET--INCLUDE</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>p ≤ .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Gangs</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>26.25</td>
<td>p ≤ .1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Gangs/10,000 population</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>p ≤ .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Gang Members</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>148.5</td>
<td>461.9</td>
<td>2894.1</td>
<td>868.9</td>
<td>p ≤ .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Gang Members/10,000 pop.</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
gangs per 10,000 in the largest cohort. There was no significant difference among the cohorts in gang members per 10,000 (table 2). Nonetheless, the earlier development of separate programs in larger communities may be related to an earlier awareness and concern about gangs, family structure, poverty and inner city life. Smaller jurisdictions may either have not been impacted by gangs until recently, or been in denial with regard to their existence and impact.

Types of Children and Youth Served

Whether to focus services on prevention or intervention is an ongoing debate both within the recreation field and in the broader area of human services. To determine where recreation and park departments are placing their emphasis, all TARGET group respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their efforts that were devoted to serving youth in each of four predefined categories: (a) potential at-risk youth (67%); (b) at-risk children and youth (21%); (c) juvenile delinquents (10%); and (d) chronic delinquents (2%) (see definitions in figure 1). Across all sizes of jurisdictions, potential at-risk youth were the main focus, followed by at-risk children and youth. Although 57% of these jurisdictions reported that they perceived gangs to be a problem in their community, only 12% stated that their agencies had programs specifically targeted at gang leaders, while 23% targeted programs at gang members. Clearly less attention is given to serving juvenile delinquents, chronic delinquents and gang members. Thus, recreation and park departments are primarily involved in prevention-oriented services with priority placed on offering services to younger children and youth before their behaviors are manifested in juvenile delinquency.

Number of At-Risk Youth Served

Respondents were asked to estimate the average number of at-risk children and youth participating per week in their programs for two time periods: summer and periods other than the summer. In each case, agencies were instructed to only count individuals once per week, even if they attended more than that.

There was a significant difference in the average number of at-risk children and youth served per week by population cohort, with large jurisdictions serving more individuals per week than smaller jurisdictions (table 1). However, when these figures were transformed to reflect attendance per week per 1,000 population, there were no significant differences. Smaller jurisdictions were equally responsive to serving this group as were larger agencies. Sometimes it tends to be assumed that efforts are disproportionately greater in larger jurisdictions because their problems and solutions tend to be more visible. These data suggest that among those agencies which target at-risk children and youth, smaller agencies reach as large a proportion of these individuals as do larger agencies.

Across all TARGET agencies (n=296), approximately 605,000 children and youth were served per week during the summer and 322,000 during non-summer weeks. Multiplying the summer figures by 12 (weeks) and the non-
Figure 1
Percent of Overall Effort Being Devoted to Each of Four Categories of At-Risk Children and Youth

Potential At-Risk Youth (66.8%)
Living in low income, high crime areas
Single parent or absent parent family
Lack of positive role models
Largest number of kids are in 5-12 age range

At-Risk Children and Youth (21.2%)
Repeatedly involved in antisocial behavior
Significant departure from the behavioral norms of the society in which they live

Juvenile Delinquents (9.5%)
Involved in non-status crimes (i.e., runaway, truancy, curfew violations)
No clear violations of the law
Penalty is detention and youth is remanded to his or her parent(s) or others
In danger of entering the juvenile justice system and being sent to a youth facility

Chronic Delinquents (2.5%)
Has committed status crimes (i.e., misdemeanors or felonies such as theft, aggravated assault, rape) which has required incarceration
Is a habitual or repeat offender
Hard-core, self-acknowledged offender or substance abuser

summer figures by 40 (weeks) provides an estimate of the total number of attendances over the year. This procedure yields 7,262,000 and 12,868,000 attendances for summer and the rest of the year respectively, for a total of over 20 million. A child attending once per week or more over the entire year would be counted in this figure 52 times. The weekly average figures and total attendance figures indicate the large number of individuals being served and the potential contribution that recreation and park agencies are making to address the needs of at-risk children and youth. However, quality of service and program outcomes are not necessarily revealed by the attendance figures.

Definitions of At-Risk Youth

All TARGET group respondents were asked to supply the working definition that their agencies use for “at-risk children and youth.” Two hundred and forty-three (n=243) of the agencies supplied definitions. A review of 100 selected responses led to the creation of categories that were subsequently used to code all of the remaining questionnaires. Repetitious and similar answers were combined into one code and categories were created based on commonalities in the codes. Broad headings were listed, with subheadings used to add clarification and structure (figure 2).

Definitions were most likely to include a component dealing with behavioral problems (66%), closely followed by family risk factors (64%). Factors
dealing with the economic environment (47%) and age factors (47%) were noted in almost half the definitions. Education (23%) and leisure components (13%) were much less frequently mentioned. No significant differences between respondents from the four population cohorts were found in the listing of definition categories.

Cluster analysis (K-means Quick Cluster) was used to see if agencies could be grouped based on the combination of definitional components they emphasized. A three cluster solution showed maximum differentiation between the definitions. Cluster 1 (behavior general) included agencies (n=129) that emphasized the behavioral problems component without reference to a specific setting, i.e., family, school or leisure; Cluster 2 (family and education centered) agencies (n=86) showed high inclusion of the family risk factors and education components, along with the age and economic environment factors components; Cluster 3 (family and leisure centered) agencies (n=28) showed high inclusion of the general behavioral definition and problems related to non-school settings (i.e., family risk factors and leisure components). However, cluster membership did not appear to be significantly related to other variables.

Figure 2
At-Risk Youth Definitional Components Noted by Survey Respondents

Behavioral Problems (65.8%)
Referred to signs of antisocial behavior, prone to gang membership, under peer pressure, considered a juvenile delinquent, low self-esteem, low self-worth, considering gang membership, and/or lack of social skills.

Family Risk Factors (64.2%)
Children coming from any of the following: a dysfunctional family unit, single parent family unit, is a latch-key child, is a pregnant teenager, and/or is lacking positive role models.

Economic Environment Factors (47.3%)
Unable to afford cost of the program, lives in the inner city, lives in low income area, has transportation problem that makes it impossible to attend programs, comes from unemployed family, lives in overcrowded area, and/or child lives in housing project.

Age Factors (46.5%)
Age or grade was listed that related to age, and/or the term youth or child was used in the definition.

Education Factors (23.0%)
Referred to academic failure, little commitment to school, and/or an underachiever in school.

Leisure Factors (13.2%)
referred to underachievement in sports, participation in negative leisure activities, no constructive activities in spare or free time, and/or not mainstreamed in recreation participation.
such as population cohort, whether jurisdictions offered separate programs, whether gangs were perceived as a problem in the community, or the category of youth programs at which programs were targeted.

Goals for Serving At-Risk Children and Youth

TARGET agencies were asked if they had specific goals for serving at-risk children and youth. Only (41%) of respondents indicated they had goals, with TARGET-SEPARATE agencies more likely to have specific goals (54%) than TARGET-INCLUDE agencies (24%). There were no significant differences between population cohorts in the extent to which agencies had goals statements. There was some tendency for TARGET-SEPARATE agencies which had offered programs longer to have developed goal statements ($p \leq .03$).

Agencies having goals were asked to supply them. Like the procedure used for categorizing the definition components above, a review of 100 of the goal statements was used to develop subcomponent categories. A modified set of categories developed by McKay (1994) was used in the final development of

Figure 3
Goal Components Noted by Survey Respondents

Scholastic Ability (81.5%)
Program tries to foster achievement motivation, interest in school, encourage spending time doing homework, encourage an attachment to school, educational aspirations, and/or foster continuing motivation.

Sociability (40.4%)
Program tries to foster a level of sociability, perceived social competence, social desirability, social interaction skills, social consciousness, positive peer socialization, social harmony, communication skills, sense of acceptance, positive racial integration, and/or introduce youth to positive role models.

Leisure-Related Outcomes (31.5%)
Program tries to foster self competency, self-as-entertainment, positive attitude towards physical education, extracurricular involvement, leisure participation, leisure ethic, leisure satisfaction, leisure repertoire, personal enjoyment, skill learning, and/or intensity of participation.

General Well Being (28.1%)
Program fosters self concept, tries to reduce self-depreciation among the child, fosters self confidence, and/or fosters positive self image among participants.

Family Factors (17.8%)
Program tries to foster family values, and/or family leadership.

Economic Factors (17.8%)
Program offers discounts to those not able to afford to participate, offers free programs, and/or offers scholarships to help those who would otherwise not be able to participate.
headings. Goals related to scholastic improvement were noted by 82% of the agencies that had goals, followed by goals related to sociability (40%), leisure (32%), general well being (29%), family issues (18%), and economic issues (18%) (figure 3).

Cluster analysis was again performed to identify groupings of agencies that had similar structures of goals across the six components. Cluster 1 (family-scholastic) agencies \( n=74 \) appeared to emphasize efforts to improve school performance and attachment as well as efforts to strengthen the family; Cluster 2 (scholastic, leisure, sociability, and economic) agencies \( n=41 \) encompassed a more general approach and included goals that cut across all settings (school, family, and community); Cluster 3 (sociability) agencies \( n=31 \) focused on sociability and social competence. Again, however, there were no significant differences in cluster membership related to variables such as population, whether jurisdictions offered separate programs, whether gangs were perceived as a problem in the community, or the category of youth programs at which programs were targeted.

The large number of agencies which lacked goal statements and the lack of specificity of the goal statements that were supplied, highlight a significant issue in an environment that increasingly emphasizes accountability. The lack of specific goals or goals written in an operational format, infers that many agencies have not identified specific standards by which to evaluate the success of their program efforts. Developing goals for a program before offering it is an essential prerequisite for evaluation of the program's success. Specifying objectives offers three significant benefits. First, properly formulated objectives help form the basis for designing programs to achieve the objectives; second, objectives that are attainable and challenging offer an incentive for improvement, if they are properly communicated and understood by staff (Crompton & Lamb, 1986); and third, when goals are specific and in written form, their achievement helps personnel and taxpayers feel that the programs are successful and worthwhile.

Agency Resource Allocations

**Staffing**

Over 43% of the TARGET agencies employed staff specifically to organize or offer programs for at-risk children and youth. These agencies averaged almost eight full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members, but there were wide differences among population cohorts. Agencies in jurisdictions with less than 75,000 population averaged slightly more than 2.5 FTEs, those from 75,001 to 250,000 employed an average of 4.4 FTEs, while the largest agencies employed an average of almost 19 FTEs. However, when these were recalculated on an FTE per 10,000 population basis, jurisdictions below 25,000 population averaged 2.1 FTE/10,000 population and all other size jurisdictions averaged between .3 and .5 FTE/10,000. This result does not necessarily mean that small jurisdictions are providing more services. Larger jurisdictions probably achieve an economy of scale that is not available to the smallest jurisdictions. It is likely that there is a minimum base level of staffing that any community must have to
be effective in this area. Nevertheless, these data do reinforce the contention of the respondent who noted, "At-risk youth are not strictly urban. Many rural youths are at great risk because of isolation."

Budget

TARGET agencies were asked to estimate their current fiscal year budget investment in programs that exclusively serve at-risk children and youth. Budget data were further broken down by population category and whether cities offered separate programs. The interaction was not significant and there was no difference between the TARGET-SEPARATE and TARGET-INCLUDE agencies. However, there was a significant difference (p<.001) in budgets of the population cohorts. Although the largest jurisdictions devoted significantly more resources to these programs than the smaller jurisdictions, on a dollar per 10,000 population basis, budgets in smaller jurisdictions for the TARGET-SEPARATE agencies were considerably larger than those in larger jurisdictions (table 3). However, among the TARGET-INCLUDE agencies there was no significant difference between budgets of agencies in different population cohorts.

Two factors may account for these results. First, again, larger jurisdictions may benefit from economies of scale. A base-level budget amount may be needed to offer any type of program, so all jurisdictions regardless of size need a minimum budget amount to offer services. However, larger departments may be able to use these targeted dollars to leverage a more substantial program effort. The higher per capita investment in the smallest jurisdictions may also mean that there are not as many other agencies to aid recreation and park departments in attacking this specific problem. Hence, recreation and park agencies are assigned greater responsibility and associated fiscal resources for addressing at-risk children and youth.

The total budget investment directed at at-risk children and youth by the 188 TARGET-SEPARATE agencies responding to this question slightly exceeded $50 million. Their budgeted amounts invested for this purpose averaged about 14% of an agency's total budget, and this did not significantly vary across population cohorts.

User Fees and Price Discounts

Another way of acquiring resources to operate programs is to charge those who participate in programs. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the responding agencies consistently charge at least some of their constituency groups some form of user fee for recreation programs. Fifty-two percent of the agencies offered discounts for at-risk children and youth. However, 76% offered discounts to low income residents in general. Hence, some of those agencies not offering specific discounts to at-risk youth may have been reaching many of this group through their discounts to low income residents. TARGET-SEPARATE agencies were significantly more likely to offer discounts for at-risk children and youth than TARGET-INCLUDE agencies (59% compared to 39%; p<.01).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 to 25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Allocations</td>
<td>$26,954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget Allocations/10,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARGET—SEPARATE</td>
<td>39,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARGET—INCLUDE</td>
<td>7,002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Separate programs by population interaction, $p \leq .06$; separate programs main effect, $p \leq .01$; population main effect, $p \leq .07$
Table 4
Problems TARGET Agencies Have Experienced in Allocating More Resources to Programs for At-Risk Children and Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of adequate budget</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of too many other priority issues</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of appreciation by elected officials of the recreation and park agency’s potential role in this area</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge of what programs have to offer</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of recognition from the community of the agency’s potential</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of skilled leadership to run these programs</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of community support for such programs</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived need for programs on the part of administrators</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problems Experienced in Allocating More Resources

All TARGET agencies were asked to rate the extent to which they had experienced each of eight potential problems in the allocation of more resources to programs for at-risk children and youth (table 4). Each item was rated on a seven point scale (1=no problem through 4=minor problem to 7=major problem). Budget (5.4) was noted as the greatest problem, followed by existence of too many other priority issues (5.0), lack of appreciation by elected officials of the agency’s potential role in this area (4.0), and lack of knowledge of what programs have to offer (3.9). A MANOVA revealed no significant differences ($p \leq .01$) by population cohort or separate program status for the eight problem areas.

The data reported in table 4 suggest that there were no major problems inhibiting the allocation of more resources to at-risk children and youth programs. The highest means were 5.4 and 5.0 for the first two items in table 4, which places them closer to minor problem than major problems on the seven point scale from which these data were derived.

The top two issues (budgets and priorities) are related in that public agencies increasingly are requested to serve a wide variety of priorities with limited, static, or declining budgets. While at-risk youth command a lot of attention, there are considerable pressures to serve the needs of senior citizens, children in general, people with disabilities, and multiple other clienteles. Finding the resources to meet the demands of all constituencies probably cannot be done without collaborating with other organizations to leverage existing funds and acquire new resources.

Collaborative Arrangements with Other Organizations
Support from Businesses, Voluntary Organizations, and Foundations

All TARGET agencies were asked if businesses, voluntary organizations, or foundations in their jurisdictions provided resources to support park and
recreation agency efforts with at-risk children and youth (table 5). Ninety-eight percent of respondents indicated their agencies received support of some kind from one of these sources. Businesses supplied the greatest amount of support (86%), followed by voluntary organizations (85%), and foundations (46%). Monetary donations (91%) were the leading kind of support, followed by volunteers (75%), equipment donations (56%) and organizational or leadership expertise (53%) (table 5). The survey failed to include a request for information about support via grants from governmental agencies.

Equipment donations from businesses and monetary donations from foundations were significantly more prevalent in the larger two population categories, while voluntary organizations were significantly more likely to make monetary donations in the two smaller population category jurisdictions.

Support from Departments to Other Organizations

Resource support can also flow in the other direction. As one respondent noted: "Considerable attention needs to be given to the appropriate role for park and recreation agencies. In our case, we do not provide a lot of services for at-risk youth, but we are very active in supporting other agencies in service delivery." A majority (65%) of TARGET agencies used public funds to support the efforts of nonprofit organizations offering programs for at-risk children and youth (table 6). TARGET agencies in the two largest population cohorts were more likely to provide such support (77% versus 51%; \(p \leq .01\)), as were TARGET-SEPARATE Agencies when compared to TARGET-INCLUDE agencies (72% versus 55%; \(p < .03\)). In larger jurisdictions there is likely to be a more substantive and diverse set of nonprofit organizations whose mission is to reach the target group. Hence, there are also likely to be occasions when it is

<p>| Table 5 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of TARGET Park and Recreation Agencies Receiving Selected Types and Sources of Support from External Entities in Support of Programs for At-Risk Children and Youth</th>
<th>Monetary Donations</th>
<th>Equipment Donations</th>
<th>Volunteering Personnel</th>
<th>Organizational Leadership or Expertise</th>
<th>Any form of Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Orgs.</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any form of Support</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more efficient and effective for a recreation and park agency to support the work of another organization with its resources, rather than establishing potentially duplicative independent services.

Collaborations with Other Organizations

Whether involved or not with sharing resources, almost every TARGET agency (97%) reported working directly with a nonprofit organization or other government agency to provide direct services for at-risk children and youth (table 6). The largest number of collaborations occurred with education agencies (85%), law enforcement agencies or officials (79%), youth serving organizations such as YMCAs or Boys and Girls Clubs (66%), and adult service organizations such as Lions or Elks (54%).

Size of jurisdiction was significantly related to the range of collaborations with communities in the largest two population cohorts collaborating on average with over five of the eight types of partners, while jurisdictions in the two smallest population cohorts averaged just over four types of collaborations (\( p \leq .02 \)). TARGET-SEPARATE agencies averaged significantly more collaborations than TARGET-INCLUDE agencies (5.0 compared to 3.9; \( p \leq .01 \)). Departments in the two largest population cohorts also were more likely to collaborate with youth serving organizations and Public Housing Authorities. In both cases, these organizations are more likely to exist in larger jurisdictions.

TARGET respondents characterized the degree of collaboration on programs for at-risk children and youth between their agency and others in their community on a seven point scale (very poor to very strong). The overall mean was 4.5, with TARGET-SEPARATE agencies indicating a higher perception of collaborative efforts (4.8 compared to 4.1; \( p \leq .01 \)).

These respondents also were asked to allocate 100 points among a group of agencies/organizations to reflect their effectiveness in helping at-risk children and youth in their community (table 7). Respondents rated their own department as most effective (28.7 out of 100 points), with education agencies (16.0), youth serving law enforcement agencies (13.8), youth serving organizations (13.0), the next three. The top six organizations were ranked in the same order by TARGET-SEPARATE and TARGET-INCLUDE agencies.

The four agencies rated highest in effectiveness are the largest providers of services in most jurisdictions. The ranking also reflects the organizations with which recreation and park agencies reported working most frequently (table 7).

Community At-Risk Youth Task Forces

Over 71% of TARGET agencies indicated that a community-wide task force had been established in their community to address the at-risk children and youth issue (table 6). Jurisdictions with populations below 25,000 were significantly less likely to have established a task force (\( p \leq .01 \)). This may reflect the higher visibility of at-risk youth issues in larger jurisdictions. The greater size of these jurisdictions; larger number of youth involved; and, hence, greater frequency of high profile negative youth actions; may account for their increased proclivity to establish task forces. Creation of a task force is another manifestation of efforts to coordinate overlapping jurisdictions, mandates, contributions, and resources.
Table 6
Nature and Extent of Collaborative Arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Overall percent</th>
<th>Significance level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 to 25,000</td>
<td>25,001 to</td>
<td>75,001 to</td>
<td>250,001 to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide funds to nonprofit organizations for programs</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>Population p ≤ .03;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54.6 (Not Separate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Separate programs p ≤ .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborations with Other Organizations (TARGET Agencies)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>n.s.¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult service</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth serving</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing Authority</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Agency</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurisdictions in which community-wide task force has been established</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>Population p ≤ .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(TARGET)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n.s. = not significant
Table 7
Perceived Effectiveness of Agencies and Organizations in Helping At-Risk Children and Youth in the Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency/Organization</th>
<th>TARGET-INCLUDE Programs</th>
<th>TARGET-SEPARATE Programs</th>
<th>TARGET-ALL Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent's Own Recreation and Park Agency</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Agencies</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Serving Organizations</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Organizations</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing Agencies</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Service Organizations</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Others</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Agency</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Numbers represent average percentage of 100 points assigned to each organization by the responding agency.

Agencies from jurisdictions with task forces were asked to indicate the role that their recreation and park department played in the work of the committee. Almost half (47%) of the jurisdictions indicated that they had central involvement, 28% indicated they played a leadership role, 24% indicated they had a minor level of involvement and 2% of the agencies indicated they had no involvement. TARGET-SEPARATE agencies had a significantly higher level of central involvement than TARGET-INCLUDE agencies (52% compared to 38%), while TARGET-INCLUDE agencies had a significantly higher level of minor involvement (32% compared to 19%). Recreation and park agencies' service centers are typically widespread throughout a community, which gives their personnel a broad view of community needs and resources. Because they tend to collaborate with many other organizations, they appear to be in a prime position to supply leadership or have central involvement (combined 74%) in task forces addressing the at-risk youth issue.

How much credit do park and recreation agencies perceive they receive from elected officials and community members for their work with at-risk children and youth? On a scale of 1 to 7 (very poor to very strong), TARGET agencies perceive they averaged 3.9 in the eyes of elected officials, and a significantly higher rating of 4.2 from community members (p ≤ .01). These mid-scale rankings indicate only lukewarm appreciation from the community. This reinforces the need to integrate evaluation into at-risk youth programming. The only way to raise these credit ratings is to provide scientific evidence that the programs work, and then to communicate these findings to elected officials and residents.

Conclusions
The human services view of recreation and parks as practiced in many urban communities places the recreation and park movement at a crossroads. One path travels down the narrow road of traditionally defined, segmented activities based on economic values; the other path leads to a multi-disciplinary community services approach that places recreation, parks and amenities in the center of the urban policy debate. (Foley & Pick, 1995, p. 70).

Based on the results of this survey, there is evidence that recreation and park agencies gradually are returning to the roots of the profession by focussing more effort on providing services for at-risk children and youth. The results suggest that the genesis of this movement emerged in the late 1980s and that it has gathered momentum since that time. Involvement is not restricted to the largest cities, but includes jurisdictions of all sizes across the United States. However, 45% of responding agencies were still not targeting any services at at-risk children and youth.

The service priorities of responsive recreation and park agencies are shaped by external forces which they cannot control, but to which they are required to adapt. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the external political forces directed that an agency’s primary concern should be to increase efficiency. This challenge was exemplified by the exhortation to Do More With Less, which was operationalized as reducing an agency’s tax subsidy, while maintaining or expanding its range of offerings. This resulted in focusing on target markets with the ability and willingness to pay prices high enough to cover most costs of service, and reducing resources invested in high subsidy programs. Agency budget decisions, organizational structures, capital facility decisions, hiring decisions, and training programs, reflected this politically mandated orientation.

Since 1988, there has been an increasing tendency for the political forces to which agencies must respond to shift their emphasis. The need to minimize tax subsidies is still articulated, but its priority status is being supplanted by growing political pressure to do something about juvenile crime and delinquency. Incidents of high-profile serious juvenile crimes appear to have grown exponentially in recent years. Each horrific event directs more political attention to the more general problems of at-risk youth. Recreation programs have been viewed by some as a means through which these problems may be addressed. This was articulated by Smith (1991) in her report to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

The provision of community recreation services is a good investment. Participation in organized recreation provides for the constructive use of free time and develops skills for the management of discretionary time and thereby reduces the need for, and the costs of, providing other governmental and social services that deal with the management of antisocial behaviors after they occur. (p. ii-iii).
The primary problems cited by the TARGET agencies as inhibiting allocation of more resources for at-risk children and youth services were limited budgets and competing priorities. Even among the TARGET-SEPARATE agencies, budget allocations to at-risk youth services constituted only between 14% of the overall budget. Out of the 625 agencies responding to the survey, only 151 employed staff specifically to service this clientele. The level of these investments appears low given the magnitude of the problem facing society; and given the opportunity for agencies to be revitalized through alignment with such a high political priority. However, there are good reasons for this relatively low investment.

Although the field is moving in response to the shifting political forces, there is an unavoidable lag time. Organizations that for a decade or more have focussed on middle-class target markets, cannot immediately reorient and commit major resources to serving at-risk youth. People who were hired because they had expertise which contributed to agencies meeting their mandate to be efficient are unlikely to possess the optimum skills needed to serve at-risk youth (e.g., mentorship, conflict resolution, assessment, objective setting, purposive programming to meet targeted objectives, behavior management, and program evaluation skills). These were articulated by the respondent who said: "Many of our participants have numerous problems which need to be addressed. These include emotional and physical problems. Our staff are becoming social workers." Goal-oriented programming will require leadership, and behavior management and change skills. These skills are not being routinely taught in park and recreation curricula, except to therapeutic recreation majors, and TR majors have shown a greater inclination toward working in clinical as opposed to community settings and undertaking services from a medical model perspective as opposed to a community organization and individual empowerment perspective.

Future resources to serve at-risk youth may come from three sources: curtailing resources currently allocated to other programs and redirecting them; additional appropriations from legislative bodies; or external partners. The first of these three options is likely to be resisted by the constituents of those existing programs, and perhaps also by staff. Lowering service standards to existing client groups is likely to lead to political protest. Ironically, the more successful and satisfying a service has been, the more clientele opposition to its curtailment there is likely to be. Opposition from staff to changes in emphases may occur since the changes may threaten an individual's status, area of expertise, or self-confidence. Thus, reallocation of resources is likely to occur only when a program's lifecycle nears its end and when turnover of staff occurs. While it would be desirable to move quickly to reallocate resources and replace less with more qualified staff, the process is likely to be more gradual due to civil service limitations, lack of inertia to change within the political process, and failure to accept the need for change on the part of clients that are currently being well served.

Reluctance to raise tax rates means that if any additional appropriations are made, they are likely to be small especially in major cities where the tax base is declining. In order to justify tax increases for at-risk youth services to their
constituents, legislators have to be provided with evidence that these programs are effective. An important first step is development of specific goals whose achievement is capable of being measured, thus enabling them to become the necessary justification of additional tax appropriations. Only 41% of the TARGET agencies had specific goal statements, and even where statements existed they were not always articulated in a manner that facilitated program planning and outcome evaluation. A city official responding to a survey of chief administrators of cities of over 100,000 commented, “Professionals in the recreation field have done a poor job of explaining the benefits and value of recreation in the community. Thus, as budget cuts came, recreation was perceived as a nonessential program and was one of the first areas cut when budget restraints hit a city” (Montiel, Hultsman, & Martin, 1995, p. 13). In this same survey, recreation was the most mentioned program area by these chief administrators as a service area that could make a difference in meeting the needs of at-risk youth. The anecdotal recognition of the potential value of recreation services by others needs to be supported with scientific evidence of impact.

The final source of additional resources is through partnerships with external groups. This survey showed there is recognition by agencies of the need to collaborate with community organizations to leverage their resources. Thus, recreation and park personnel through their leadership and/or involvement in community task force coordinating committees appeared to be widely involved in developing a multifaceted system of services for at-risk youth. Smith (1991) noted “A major challenge to recreation agencies in the coming years will be to initiate collaboration and to expand their roles as facilitators and coordinators of all organizations in the community that provide recreation services” (p. i). The need for coordination extends to school districts, youth serving organizations, law enforcement agencies, religious organizations, public housing authorities, and many others, and the survey results suggested this was happening extensively among the TARGET agencies.

The fragmented approach of dealing with each of the risk issues separately (e.g., drug use, dropping out of school, or teen pregnancy) and creating services in single agencies without respect to the resources of the system as a whole (e.g., legal system, school system, and the health department) fails to make maximum use of resources and to create holistic responses that deal with children and youth and the system in which they operate in an integrated manner (Dryfoos, 1990).

The TARGET-SEPARATE agencies invested slightly in excess of $50 million of agency budgeted funds in programming for at-risk children and youth. They serviced approximately 450,000 and 222,000 individuals at least once a week in the summer and non-summer periods, respectively. Assuming half of their budgets were allocated to accommodate the peak summer clientele, the cost of serving each individual in the summer would be approximately $56 ($25 million/450,000). Similarly, the non-summer costs per individual would be approximately $113 ($25 million/222,000). Thus, the year-round cost of operating prevention programs for at-risk children and youth in the TARGET-
SEPARATE agencies was approximately $169 per child. Texas authorities recently announced that the cost of detaining a juvenile in State facilities was in excess of $30,000 per year. This suggests that if at-risk youth prevention programs succeeded in preventing the annual detention of only 1 in every 178 individuals, then such programs are cost efficient.

The investment in budget allocations to programs that exclusively served at-risk children and youth showed that in absolute terms the budgets of the largest population cohorts were significantly higher than the other three population cohorts, but the smallest cities spent significantly more per capita than did those in the largest two population cohorts. However, it appeared that agencies in larger communities were able to use these targeted dollars to leverage a more substantial program effort through collaborations with other organizations targeting the same groups.

The investment in budget allocations for these programs reflects the pattern of investment in personnel. The number of full-time equivalent positions directly serving at-risk children and youth employed by cities with a population over 225,000 was significantly larger than the number employed by smaller cities. This result was anticipated because of the much larger number of at-risk youth who were served by large cities. However, when those data were expressed as a ratio in terms of full-time equivalent number of employees per 10,000 population, it revealed that the smallest cities averaged almost two full-time equivalent positions per 10,000, which was a significantly higher number than in larger cities.

Converting data from absolute to ratio form demonstrated another trend. In absolute form the data showed that the larger jurisdictions and communities with more gangs, concentrated more effort and investment than the smaller agencies in addressing the at-risk children and youth issue. However, in ratio form the results were reversed.

The purpose of this national survey was to gain insights in the general nature of the contributions that recreation and park agencies are making in addressing the at-risk children and youth problem. The study suggested that agencies in all sizes of jurisdictions were targeting at-risk children and youth with recreation programs. Results indicated that larger communities with more gang problems were the largest investors in these programs. However, this trend is shifting and in the last five years more agencies with smaller populations have started targeting at-risk children and youth. Their primary focus is on prevention rather than intervention. This momentum from agencies in small communities suggests that rather than denying there is a problem, decision makers and recreation agencies are trying to prevent negative impacts that have a chance to flourish.

The study suggests that hiring staff specifically for the purpose of offering separate programs for at-risk children and youth also is gaining momentum, especially in larger cities with gang problems. Since 55% of jurisdictions target potential at-risk youth, the use of specialist staff is likely to grow. With 57% of agencies reporting that they perceived gangs to be a problem in their community, and only 14% and 24% responding that their agencies had programs to
specifically target gang leaders and gang members, respectively, its seems likely that increasing number of staff with skills related to servicing at-risk children and youth will be hired.

References


