

Collaborating for Justice: Disproportionate Minority Contact and Community Psychology

Minority youth, specifically African American and Latino/Hispanic males, have historically been overrepresented at every stage of the U.S. criminal justice system (Piquero, 2008). For these youth, initial contact can lead to transitions from one correctional institution to another and diminish their ability to contribute to their community and society in healthy ways. These trends have led to what the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention calls “**disproportionate minority contact** (DMC).” Numerous points of interaction across the ecological context can directly and indirectly affect DMC, from the family, neighborhood, school, and institutional level.



Among the most valued principles of community psychology are promoting systems change and social justice. Using these principles and responding to DMC, the **Center for Community Safety** at Winston-Salem State University is fostering collaboration among key stakeholders and researchers to address DMC in North Carolina. Under the direction of Alvin Atkinson, Executive Director, the Center is undertaking two forms of action: 1) leading a research team to examine contributing factors to DMC and identify areas of need across youth services; and 2) organizing key stakeholders from agencies (i.e., Department of Social Services and juvenile detention centers) and institutions (i.e., law enforcement and public school system) throughout Forsyth County to engage in dialogue and develop an action plan to address DMC. The process of engaging stakeholders was a daunting task and required some push from the national and state level; nonetheless, it provided the leverage needed to get stakeholders talking about the issue. According to Mr. Atkinson:

“Initially, the DMC stakeholders were identified and assembled by a different agency that had received funding to address the issue. The Center was the research partner for this collaborative and our 2006 report on DMC in Forsyth County solidified our role

on this issue. When the funded ended, we stepped up to serve as the coordinating agency for Forsyth DMC efforts. We did this with the hope that the committee and our community would pursue some of the recommendations in the report. Our initial efforts did not gain any traction locally, but did on the state and national levels. For the next few years, we used our work at the state level to keep the issue alive locally but did not invest heavily in reconvening stakeholders until the end of 2010 when we were ready to bring our knowledge and experience from our state and national involvement to Forsyth County. Since most of the stakeholders were familiar with our earlier work and having heard about our DMC work in the state, we were able to reconvene the group.”

The Center for Community Safety was established in 2001 to “engage communities in the strategic utilization of research to shape action and enhance response to community safety issues” (Center for Community Safety, 2012). The Center has been integral to Forsyth County and North Carolina by providing research, training, and technical assistance to build capacity among organizations that address violence prevention and intervention. As a result, the Center would expand the university’s connection with “external constituencies and communities to respond to community-identified needs” (Harvey, Mac-Thompson, & Easterling, 2003). Historically the Center has served more as a facilitator within the community; however, through DMC, the Center is utilizing research and analytic strategies to bridge the connection between research and action. Mr. Atkinson believes that, “With DMC, our research contribution is valued and it also provides a service to the community.”

Through the support of the Governors Crime Commission and Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Center is currently conducting a state-wide mixed methods study of DMC to assess the point where DMC is most prevalent across initial referrals to detainment and areas where there exist the greatest need to address youth and family services. According to Mr. Atkinson, the intent of this work is to “seek to improve collaborative research efforts and regain the confidence and trust of the stakeholders.” Ultimately, the findings seek to support advocacy efforts by local leaders in promoting positive youth and community development and addressing systems’ change.

Through the leadership of Mr. Atkinson and collaboration between community stakeholders and researchers from Winston-Salem State University, the goals of this endeavor are manifold. However, the Center is striving to become a relevant participant in facilitating systems change by advocating for strategies and initiatives that reduce the number of minority youth involved in the criminal justice system.

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References:

Harvey, L., Mac-Tompson, D., & Easterling, D. (2003). A blueprint for sustaining community-based initiatives: A case study of the Center for Community Safety at Winston-Salem State University. A report submitted to the National Institute of Justice.

Piquero, A. R. (2008). Disproportionate Minority Contact. Retrieved on September 21, 2012 from http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/18_02_04.pdf

For more information about the Center for Community Safety, see <http://centerforcommunitysafety.org/>

For more information about Disproportionate Minority Contact, see <http://www.ojjdp.gov/dmc/>

This is a part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. For more information about the series, contact Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu

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