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Introductory Comments: Applied Behavior Analysis in Crime and Delinquency: Focus on Prevention

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Crime and delinquency represent a broad and serious social problem. In seriousness, they range from activities most societies find reprehensible most of the time (e.g., aggravated assault) to activities some societies find reprehensible only some of the time (e.g., crimes without victims). In breadth, suffice it to say that few among us have never offended. The combined seriousness and extent of crime and delinquency have made them a primary public concern and the focus of numerous and varied efforts to understand and correct them. These efforts range from the optimism of scientific accounts and the possibility of correctional intervention, to the pessimism of biological determinism and the death penalty.

Behavior analysis is perhaps one of the most optimistic alternatives for understanding and correcting crime and delinquency (see, e.g., Burgess & Akers, 1966; Nietzel, 1979; Stumphauzer, 1986). But, although many theories of social deviance are somewhat compatible with a "learning theory" orientation (see Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1980), applied behavior analysis has not been as effective or widespread as originally envisioned. The reasons for the latter are many, among them: (a) the field of behavioral corrections has occasionally instituted ill-conceived programs (Emery & Marholin, 1977; Geller et al., 1977; Johnson, 1977); (b) where society has permitted behavioral corrections, it has sometimes perverted them to its own uses (see Holland, 1978; Reppucci & Saunders, 1974); and (c) perhaps nowhere else in our culture are the philosophies of determinism and free will more at odds than in our legal system (Hart, 1968). One of the consequences of this misapplication and resistance is a seeming decline in behavioral corrections—at least in the published literature. Indeed, today there may be more reviews of the behavioral corrections literature than there are studies to review (Milan, personal communication, 1986).

The possibility of developing behavioral corrections that really work is a difficult, but attainable goal. However, even when excellent programs are available (see, e.g., the Achievement Place, Teaching-Family model; Wolf, Phillips, & Fixsen, 1972), generalization and maintenance will probably remain a serious problem (Kirigin, Braukmann, Atwater, & Wolf, 1982). To think otherwise seems shortsighted: It overlooks the fact that the environments to which incarcerated offenders return are the pervasive and powerful "behavior modification programs" that established the offending in the first place. Or, turned around, behavioral corrections (i.e., the tertiary prevention of further crime and delinquency) can be viewed as the "A" phase in a B-A-B (treatment-baseline-treatment) reversal design for evaluating how well the natural environment establishes and maintains social deviance. What needs changing is this latter "treatment" environment. To be more specific, the tertiary prevention of behavioral corrections needs to be augmented with (a) prevention programs that keep already at-risk individuals from becoming criminals or delinquents (secondary prevention) and (b) prevention programs that keep the population as a whole from engaging in such activity (primary prevention).

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Primary and secondary crime and delinquency prevention programs are actually not uncommon, but they are not always labelled as behavior-analytic, and are not always published for strictly behavior-analytic audiences. Examples of this work are evident in school-based interventions (e.g., Mayer et al., 1983; Safer, 1982), family-based treatment (e.g., Alexander & Barton, 1980; Lutzker, 1984), neighborhood programs (O'Donnell, 1980; Burchard, Harig, Miller, & Amour, 1976), and law enforcement (Schnelle, Kirchner, McNees, & Lawler, 1975; Van Houten, Nau, & Marini, 1980) (see also Burchard & Burchard, in press).

Crime and delinquency require more of these preventative efforts—efforts that reduce the incidence of this social problem and that do so in a cost-effective manner. In order to stimulate further behavior-analytic work in these areas, and to increase the visibility and adoption of already extant programs, a symposium was conducted at the 1986 meeting of the American Psychological Association, bearing the same title as this special section of the journal—"Applied Behavior Analysis in Crime and Delinquency: Focus on Prevention." Manuscript versions of the three papers presented in that symposium were invited for publication; their respective authors prepared and revised their manuscripts accordingly. We are pleased to publish these papers.

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