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# Dereliction of Duty: Training Schools for Delinquent Parents in the 1940s

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*Parental culpability for juvenile delinquency has permeated social welfare thought and practice throughout U.S. history. This article presents a case study of one Midwestern municipality's efforts to create a training school for parents as a remedy for delinquency in the 1940s. The case study illustrates how city leaders attempted to put theory about delinquency causation into practice by forging a collaborative intervention strategy among various community partners including public schools, social welfare agencies, and law enforcement. In light of the case study, this article examines historical and contemporary efforts to punish parents of juvenile delinquents.*

*Key words: juvenile delinquency, social welfare history, parental responsibility*

Throughout American social welfare history, theorists and practitioners have often attributed the source of delinquency to parents. Historically, several theories of delinquency have emphasized the role of the family environment, most recently Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory of low self-control (Unnever, Cullen, & Agnew, 2006). Interventions over time have reflected the theoretical underpinning of parental culpability for juvenile delinquency. In practice, nineteenth century interventions for delinquency focused largely on removal of children from their parents and placement in foster homes or juvenile institutions for the duration of their minority. Creators of the juvenile court in the late 1800s shifted the focus to diversionary and probationary methods of intervention while

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keeping families intact. Subsequently, laws were established allowing for the conviction and punishment of parents under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court in the early 1900s. A resurgence of parental responsibility laws in the 1990s demonstrates the continued popularity of such theories in practice (Arthur, 2005; Brank, Kucera, & Hays, 2005; Brank & Weisz, 2004; Tyler & Segady, 2000). All 50 states have enacted laws that punish parents for their children's delinquency via mandatory parenting classes, fines, or imprisonment (Brank, Kucera, & Hays, 2005).

During World War II, this concept of parental culpability for delinquency took on particular salience as families experienced disruption due to the departure of fathers to war overseas and mothers to the workplace. Beginning in 1941, concern over increasing delinquency rates led to an adjunct rise in attention and intervention efforts aimed at addressing and preventing delinquency. This study examines how one municipality sought to implement a parental training program for the prevention and treatment of delinquency during the war period. Relatively little has been written on the history of juvenile corrections during the period between the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s) and the *In re Gault* decision in 1967. In addition, most studies to date have focused on the establishment and proliferation of the juvenile court system, correctional facilities and other institutional responses to delinquency. This study presents a case study of a community-based intervention from a time period with little coverage in the literature (1943-1949).

The inquiry is rooted in an examination of documents from the United Way of Minneapolis records from 1943-1949, which include committee discussions of the parental school concept as well as a paper describing the San Francisco Parental School, the pioneering model which other cities, including Minneapolis, sought to replicate. Documents used were selected based on their relevance to the planning and implementation of the parental school idea in Minneapolis between 1943 and 1949, the time period during which this prospect was developed. The documents used are primarily minutes from meetings of the Minneapolis Community Councils Coordinating Committee and its Executive Committee and related correspondence. Two additional documents from the records were also utilized, one

a research report compiled on delinquency in Minneapolis from 1940-1944 and the other a description of the San Francisco Parental School written by one of its founders. Documents were examined in chronological order and scanned for their connection to the parental school discussion. Some meeting minutes contain full transcripts of conversations while others offer summaries of the points discussed and decisions made. The case study was constructed by examining these meeting notes and supplementary documents.

As Schlossman (2005) notes, "continuity rather than change best characterizes American thinking of the subject of delinquency causation" when it comes to parental culpability (p. 69). Eric Schneider's (1993) work on the treatment of juvenile delinquents and their families in Boston provides a comprehensive view of nineteenth century efforts on the part of social welfare institutions to address juvenile delinquency. Schneider argues that practitioners, having determined children to be reformable in spite of poor parenting, created various institutions and interventions in order to instill proper morals, cultural attitudes and behaviors in wayward youth. Throughout the 1800s, these interventions took on various forms, from family-style institutions to the placing-out movement spearheaded by Charles Loring Brace and his New York Children's Aid Society. The latter model, mimicked in other Eastern cities, removed children from their urban homes and placed them with farm families in America's West (Schneider, 1993). Despite changes in appearance, each of these efforts emphasized the family as the locus of both blame and remedy for juvenile delinquency. However, the idea that the family of origin, and the parents in particular, might be a target of intervention did not come about until the formation of the juvenile court system beginning in 1899. Instead, during the nineteenth century, efforts to address juvenile delinquency focused on child removal and reform outside of the family of origin.

Thus, prior to the establishment and proliferation of the juvenile court system, the assumption regarding causation of juvenile delinquency and its remedy can be summarized as follows: the parents have failed, therefore remove and reform the child. However, the juvenile court, as outlined in the Illinois Juvenile Court Act of 1899, defined the best interest of the child

as the family home, preferably the parents' if it appeared suitable (Hawes, 1971). This ideological shift resulted in the following change in logic: the parents have failed, therefore, remove, reform, and return the child, *and* reform the parents. The argument being, what good would it do to remove children from their homes, only to return them to the same familial environments that caused their delinquency in the first place?

Schlossman (2005) observes that, due to the juvenile court's emphasis on probation, "the possibility of teaching inept parents to mend their ways was seriously entertained" (p. 70). In 1925, Augusta Bronner, who worked with William Healy in Boston's well-known child guidance clinic, wrote that children found delinquent by the court should be removed from the home "... until sufficient time has elapsed to make over unworthy or stupid parents, to teach them the principles of child psychology, to alter in very fundamental ways a considerable share of mankind" (Mennel, 1973, p. 167). In addition, several jurisdictions adopted laws directly punishing parents for the delinquent acts of their children, beginning with Denver in 1903 (Sutton, 1988). A Kansas law allowed for parents to be fined up to \$1,000 and sentenced to up to one year if found guilty of contributing to the delinquency of their children (Mennel, 1973, p. 145). In this way, the juvenile court exercised some jurisdiction over the parents of delinquents for the first half of the twentieth century.

When U.S. participation in World War II drew fathers overseas and mothers to the workplace, public concern grew over the potential for a rise in juvenile delinquency due to disruption of the home environment. Gilbert (1986) argues that it was the anticipation of an increase in delinquency rather than actual evidence of such that led to this unease. National and local leaders alike made efforts to study and address juvenile delinquency in response. The U.S. Senate held hearings in 1943 to assess the issue, soliciting testimony from national leaders in juvenile corrections. Father E. J. Flanagan (1943), then the superintendent of Nebraska's renowned Boys Town, testified that the most difficult thing to change in a child's life is the home. According to Flanagan, parents "frequently are not amenable to outside suggestion" and "in most cases they have experienced absolutely no training for parenthood, the great

responsibilities of which they are expected to carry out in an intelligent and capable manner" (p. 69). Even more emphatically, Charles J. Hahn (1943), Executive Secretary of the National Sheriff's Association, stated, "... there is more parental or adult delinquency than there is juvenile delinquency. Someone has failed" (p. 72). The general consensus among such leaders was that parents' failure to properly rear their children was the leading cause for increased delinquency.

During this time, community leaders in San Francisco developed an intervention for delinquent parents referred to by subsequent commentators as a "fad" (Gilbert, 1986) and "futile effort" (Bloch & Flynn, 1956) in delinquency prevention: the parental school, comprised of mandatory training classes for parents of juvenile delinquents. While these later critics of the parental school program considered it ineffective in retrospect, its appeal during the 1940s is evidenced by attempts on the part of several other jurisdictions to replicate it. Indeed, Gilbert notes that despite criticism of the parental school by such entities as the Children's Bureau, its spread to other localities reflected the appeal of such interventions to address anxiety about the family's influence on delinquency that characterized the time. Minneapolis was one such jurisdiction.

### The San Francisco Model

In order to contextualize the parental school discussions in Minneapolis, it is useful to first examine the San Francisco school, which other cities like Minneapolis sought to emulate. According to the school's director Jay Minkler (1944), the program began on May 3, 1943 and was founded by George Jarrett, then Executive Secretary of the San Francisco Coordinating Council. Jarrett conceived the idea of a program for parents of delinquents similar to a successful driver retraining school for traffic offenses in San Francisco (Pearce, 1945). The stated purpose of the school was to improve the welfare of juveniles by addressing deficiencies the home environment (Minkler, 1944). Parents were referred to the San Francisco Parental School by the Juvenile Court, as well as by police agencies, the district attorney's office, public schools, and social agencies (Minkler, 1944, p. 2). The school's curriculum included

the following topics, each designated to one week of the eight-week program: "The Legal Responsibility of the Parent;" "The Parent's Responsibility for the Child's Health;" "The Parent's Responsibility for Maintaining an Adequate Recreational Program;" "What are the Community Facilities For?;" "Your Child's School Career;" "The Relationship of the Church to the Home;" "The Child's Emotional Life;" and "The Importance of a Job for Your Child." Each topic was led by a community expert in that area, such as the juvenile court district attorney, an official from the Department of Public Health, a child psychiatrist, and so on. Group meetings typically lasted one hour and allowed for discussion from the parents. According to Minkler (1944), "Leaders do not lecture or talk down to the class, but speak informally and in a neighborly and democratic tone" (p. 1). The Parental School also offered individual counseling with Mr. Minkler or probation officers and case workers who were involved in follow-up with parents.

Founder George Jarrett likened delinquent parents to delinquent taxpayers. Just as the unpaid taxes are not delinquent, neither are children. Rather, it is the responsible party (taxpayer or parent) who is to blame. According to Jarrett, "How can a child be delinquent? The answer is that he isn't. But his father and mother are. Let's go after them" (Pearce, 1945, p. 161). The San Francisco Parental School was founded on two principles: (1) the parents have failed in their responsibilities to their children; and (2) parents do not know how to use available community resources to assist themselves and their children (Pearce, 1945, p. 162). Minkler (1944) further cites the Webster's dictionary definition of delinquency, which states that one who is delinquent "neglects or fails in a duty or obligation" (p. 1). According to this definition, says Minkler, it cannot be the child who has neglected his duty, but his parents. Minkler's reference to parents' neglect of duty toward their children is curious given the historical context. After all, parents were fulfilling their patriotic duty in the nation's war effort, with many fathers fighting overseas and mothers working outside the home during this time period. Nonetheless, the rationale for the San Francisco Parental School's existence was dereliction of parental duty. At the same time, Minkler (1944) notes that "a serious emergency exists in the American home" due to these

war-induced parental absences, suggesting that perhaps larger societal forces were at least partly responsible for children's delinquent behavior (p. 1).

Both Pearce (1945) and Minkler (1944) claimed great success for the school, citing such evidence as completion of the program by 300 parents, none of whom returned to the school following graduation, and agreement among public officials, judges, social workers, ministers, lawyers, educators and the parents involved that the program benefitted the community. As a result, Pearce (1945) concludes that the school has become "a proved weapon with which to combat the frightening increase in wayward youth" (p. 163).

Neither Minkler nor Pearce present particularly objective evidence to support their claims; though their enthusiasm for the program is clear. After citing the evidence above, Minkler (1944) states that accomplishments "in the field of prevention simply do not lend themselves to statistical treatment and many results have to be taken for granted" (p. 2). While this assessment would hardly meet contemporary standards for evidence-based practice in juvenile justice, the fact that others who heard of or visited the San Francisco Parental School regarded it as a model to emulate in the treatment and prevention of delinquency is evident by the attempts of several other jurisdictions to mimic it.

### The Minneapolis Case

During the 1940s, community leaders in Minneapolis embarked on new efforts to address juvenile delinquency. In 1943, leaders raised concern about separate detention facilities for juveniles who were regularly housed in adult county or city jails. A mayoral committee was appointed in March of that year to investigate the conditions in adult jails and make recommendations for changes (Juvenile Delinquency, n.d.). Reports from this committee indicated that the state of detention facilities for youth was quite poor. These reports contain strong language, including the unanimous assessment by police and probation officers that the current state of things was a "disgrace to the city and the county" (Day, 1945). One report relayed how a boy housed in the adult section of the jail overnight was so terribly



bitten by bed bugs that he needed treatment at the General Hospital (Minutes, 1945).

In 1945, the Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies (later the United Way of Minneapolis) and the Hennepin County Juvenile Court and Probation Office produced a report on trends in juvenile delinquency in Minneapolis from 1940-1944 (Segner, 1945). In his final report, Research Consultant Peter Segner (1945) observed that much had been said of juvenile delinquency in the public square during the war years, citing commentary released by J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and stories in the media regarding disorder in larger cities such as Detroit and Los Angeles. Gilbert (1986) also notes the effect that Hoover's warnings about rises in delinquency and disorder during wartime had on escalating public concern. Hoover's examples of delinquency were often highly sensationalized, his statements were morally charged, and they were often published in the popular press, giving the issue widespread attention. Further, Gilbert credits the 1943 "zoot suit" riots in Los Angeles and similar unrest in other cities, such as Detroit, with contributing to public fear of growing delinquency. The zoot suit riots highlighted the racial and ethnic tensions underlying the increased public anxiety about juvenile crime. During the week-long riots, white servicemen in Los Angeles attacked young Mexican-American men wearing zoot suits, which were emblematic to the public of a burgeoning culture of delinquency (Gilbert, 1986). Given that zoot suits were typically worn by Mexican-American and black youth, this incident tapped into latent racial tensions in the public discourse about delinquency during wartime.

Segner (1945) further notes that most homes in Minneapolis had family members either directly or indirectly involved in the war effort. In addition, he asserts that it was a "well-established fact" that delinquency increases during war and post-war periods but then declines during "more normal times" (p. 2). Segner remarks that adult anxiety about the war and mothers working outside the home were disruptive factors for children, reflecting similar concerns voiced in the San Francisco Parental School documents. However, Segner expresses a measure of skepticism concerning the level of attention that has been drawn to the problem. While the report reveals an increase in

the number of delinquents adjudicated by the juvenile court in Minneapolis between 1940-1944, from 860 cases in 1940 to 1,270 in 1944 (an increase of 47.7%), Segner stresses that delinquency is "one of the most easily detected symptoms of fundamental social disorganization" and notes that other social concerns also arise simultaneously (p. 3). Citing contemporary sociologists such as Gluek and Gluek (1930) and Shaw and McKay (1942), Segner concludes that, "Delinquency itself cannot be controlled unless and until some of these other factors in social breakdown are also controlled" (p. 13). Whether this report reflects the mindset of public officials in Minneapolis regarding the causes of delinquency is unclear. However, as an examination of the Minneapolis Community Councils Coordinating Committee's (hereafter the Committee) discussion of the parental school reveals, not all of the key stakeholders involved appeared willing to "go after" the parents in the manner described by Jarrett and Minkler of San Francisco.

The San Francisco Parental School first came to the attention of the Committee's leaders in January of 1946. One member, Tom Tallakson, presented the Minkler document to the Executive Committee and discussion began regarding whether a legal basis for such a program existed in Minneapolis. They referred the idea to a subcommittee for further study and a presentation at the next meeting of the whole Committee (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946a). The decision to pursue the establishment of such a school in Minneapolis occurred on March 11, 1946 at a meeting of the entire Committee. It was reported that Judge Fred Wright of the juvenile court, Howard Hush and Lieutenant Magni Palm of the Hennepin County Probation Department, as well as Dr. Walter Anderson of the school board were all in favor of the idea. As a result, a resolution was passed authorizing the Committee to organize the school (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946a).

Subsequent meeting minutes reveal what became the central tension among community leaders regarding the parental school. Committee members strongly disagreed about whether or not attendance at the school should be mandatory. On the one hand, some argued that without compulsory attendance, parents would not take part in the program. As one

member put it, "If you are going to impart any responsibility on the people you have to send those people to the school" (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946b). Those of this opinion argued for putting "teeth into the law." On the other hand, some committee members cited reasons why compulsory attendance might be detrimental. Such reasons included the need to "sell" parents on the values of the program and ensure the "right attitude" for learning, both of which would be better accomplished through voluntary attendance (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946b).

The Committee made substantial efforts to resolve the tension over compulsory attendance as well as garner broader community support for the school. A meeting attended by 40 community leaders from social service agencies, schools, and law enforcement to discuss the parental school proposal was held on March 20, 1946 (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946d). The Committee also gathered information from other cities that had attempted parental schools like the San Francisco model, including Joliet, IL, Dearborn, MI, and Columbus, OH (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946c). Most strikingly, the Committee brought Jay Minkler, Director of the San Francisco school, to Minneapolis to meet with community leaders and sent Ted Knudson to visit the San Francisco school (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946b, 1946c). Such actions indicate that Committee leaders sought to ensure that a parental school, if established in Minneapolis, would have sufficient community backing.

The results of these efforts did not favor a centralized school for delinquent parents in Minneapolis. Following the initial meeting of 40 community leaders to discuss the parental school concept, one member of the Minneapolis Board of Education wrote a letter to the Committee expressing his wish that attendance for parents be voluntary and suggested that perhaps parents could be administered an examination to assess their need for such training (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946d). In response, Tom Tallakson suggested that the Committee just get the program started and resolve the compulsory attendance issue later. His concern was to "get people there who need it" (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946d). Committee members agreed

and Bess Knox was appointed Chairman of the Advisory Committee for the Parental School. Miss Knox, a principal at one of the Minneapolis public schools, was charged with being the "official hostess" of the parental school and creating a "friendly atmosphere" (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946d).

After Jay Minkler's visit to Minneapolis on May 10, 1946, Howard Hush of Hennepin County's Probation Office "reversed his position" on establishing a central parental school (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946a). Instead, Mr. Hush advocated that the school be voluntary, informal, and held at several school sites within the city. Evidently, the weight of Mr. Hush's opinion mattered enough to hold a special Committee meeting for him to explain his changed point of view. In order for the parental school to be viable, the Committee needed the support of the public schools as well as the juvenile justice system. The public schools were important because, in addition to providing instructors and a place to meet, the Committee hoped that the schools might eventually take over full responsibility for the parental school. The juvenile court and probation system were needed in order to provide parent referrals (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946b). Without support of key stakeholders in these arenas, it would be difficult for the Committee to create and sustain a parental school akin to the one in San Francisco.

Subsequent to Mr. Minkler's visit to Minneapolis, Mr. Knudson of the Committee visited San Francisco to observe their parental school as well as their juvenile court system in general. At a meeting of the Committee on September 12, 1946, Mr. Knudson reported his findings (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946c). A transcript of his comments shows that, in practice, the San Francisco model never successfully employed compulsion with parents, at least not in all cases. They found, as some Committee members suspected, that "outright compulsion results in resentment" (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946c). During his visit, Mr. Knudson discovered that the National Probation Association had conducted a study asking San Francisco Parental School graduates what they had learned. The study showed that most parents said that they knew the material already and learned

nothing new. According to Mr. Knudson's conversations with parental school and juvenile court officials, parents were compelled to the school only if they were charged by the court with contributing to the delinquency of a minor, otherwise the judge simply met privately with the parents and attempted to convince them that the parental school would help prepare them for their child's return from the state training school (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1946c).

A subsequent meeting of the Executive Committee details the plans for the Minneapolis parental school in light of these events. Classes were to be implemented in a six week, rather than an eight week, session and held at two public school locations. Bess Knox advocated for the two location plan, citing the idea that one location might create the idea that "there is where the convicts are sent" (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1946e). Committee members felt that public support for the program was strong, given that 68% of parents who responded to a survey said they wanted it.

Minutes dated January 11, 1947 discuss the implementation of "Understanding Your Child" classes at two Minneapolis junior high schools, Bryant and Jordan. According to the notes, the Bryant school had already run one series of the class, while Jordan was about to begin its first (Community Councils Coordinating Committee, 1947). Topics for the upcoming six week session were to include radio programs, public health, delinquency in the community (panel discussion), mental health, religion, and recreation. Attendance numbers for the Bryant series were relatively low, with 21 being the highest at any one meeting and 13 the average. A total of nine parents had attended every session, none of whom had been referred by the juvenile court. Another mention of "Understanding Your Child" appeared in the Community Councils Executive Committee minutes in April, 1949. This discussion was brief and largely focused on paying the instructor's fee. However, it demonstrates that the classes were still underway after two years, although they had not expanded beyond the two original locations (Community Councils Executive Committee, 1949). Apparently, what had begun as a vision for a citywide, compulsory school for delinquent parents in Minneapolis ended as a small-scale, voluntary series of classes offered at two sites.

## Discussion

This case study of how one municipality sought to replicate a community-based method for juvenile delinquency treatment and prevention provides a historical backdrop for contemporary debates surrounding parental culpability for juvenile crime. While this study is certainly limited by its small scope, a review of recent literature in criminology demonstrates that the idea of legally-mandated training for parents of delinquent youth is still salient.

As recently as 2004, a study by Brank and Weisz found that a majority (68.7%) of Americans believe that, after juveniles themselves, parents are most responsible for juvenile crime. However, this does not translate into strong support for punishment of parents. The authors outline three forms, which vary nationwide, of holding parents legally responsible for their children's actions: civil liability for crimes against property or person, criminal liability for contributing to the delinquency of a child, and obligation to be involved with criminal sanctions against the child. Despite the apparent low level of public support for punitive sanctions against parents of delinquents, this study illustrates the persistence of the perception that the home environment is a primary causal factor in the problem of juvenile delinquency.

Laskin (2000) also traces a reemergence since 1988 of parental liability laws in the U.S. Laskin argues that such laws unjustly stigmatize and criminalize minority mothers whose children are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system. Strikingly, Laskin advocates a system to address this problem that encompasses both the parents and the children by providing recreational diversion for children coupled with group sessions for parents facilitated by social workers or psychologists. Here, parents can communicate their common struggles and, through the facilitators, "be exposed to methods that effectively prevent children from becoming delinquent" (Laskin, 2000, p. 1204). Although Laskin differentiates these group sessions from parenting classes as being more discussion rather than expert-based, their general form remains remarkably familiar in light of the 1940s parental school movement outlined above.

Two additional studies of contemporary, mandatory parenting classes for parents of delinquent youth illustrate not only the persistence of the idea of parental culpability, but also practices notably similar to those of the San Francisco Parental School and Minneapolis' "Understanding Your Child." The first, conducted in 1991, randomly assigned 55 families of chronically offending delinquents to either a parenting training program or traditional services provided by the juvenile court and community agencies (Bank, Marlowe, Reid, Patterson, & Weinrott, 1991). The study found that both the treatment group (parent-training) and control group (traditional services) demonstrated reduced rates of offenses during the follow-up period, with the treatment group dropping more quickly, but not necessarily more significantly. The parent-training group also had one-third less the rate of re-incarceration (Bank et al., 1991). The second study, a qualitative analysis of a court-ordered parenting skills class for parents of juvenile offenders located in a Northern California juvenile detention facility, found that perspectives on the problem and parenting differed greatly between probation staff who led the sessions and parents who participated (Schaffner, 1997). Like the San Francisco Parental School model, parents are required to complete a set of ten sessions, each of which is led by a probation officer who invites guest speakers or presents videos on topics such as drug use, sexual abuse and school counseling (Schaffner, 1997, p. 414).

### Conclusion

Given the evidence from contemporary criminological literature that both the attribution of delinquency to parental culpability and programs to train parents of delinquents are still in use, this historical case study of the parental school concept in 1940s Minneapolis provides an historical context for current thinking and intervention strategies. As such, Gilbert's (1986) dismissal of the parental school as a "fad" is questionable. At least, as fads often do, this one has resurfaced in recent years as an appealing intervention strategy. However, Bloch and Flynn's (1956) assessment of such interventions as "futile efforts" remains open to debate. The question is

whether or not the theoretical concept of parental culpability for delinquency can be successfully translated into intervention strategies with parents. For researchers and practitioners, the tensions faced by the Minneapolis Community Councils Coordinating Committee in contemplating and implementing "Understanding Your Child" may prove illustrative and suggest questions for study surrounding such issues as program effectiveness and the role of family environment in the causation and remediation of juvenile delinquency. Such questions might include the viability of collaboration between social welfare agencies, law enforcement, and schools, as well as the importance of parental motivation in rates of program success.

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