

Wilderness Camps

Wilderness camps (or challenge programs or wilderness therapy programs) are residential placements that provide participants with a series of physically challenging outdoor activities designed to prevent or reduce delinquent behavior and recidivism. Wilderness camps serve as alternatives to traditional detention (Tarolla et al. 2002). The Government Accountability Office (GAO) defined wilderness therapy as “a program that places youth in different natural environments, including forests, mountains, and deserts” (GAO 2007, 5). The programs seek to remove youths from the distractions of their everyday lives, so they can concentrate on themselves while in the program. These programs vary widely in terms of settings, eligibility criteria, types of activities, duration, involvement of family members, and therapeutic goals. Key program components common in wilderness camps include therapeutic camping, rock climbing, wagon train trips, overnight solo experiences, alternative schools, individual and group therapy sessions, and family counseling (Roberts 2004).

Lack of a Standard Definition

Although wilderness camps have distinct program components, there are currently no standardized definitions of residential programs that allow for easy differentiation between program types. This has led to confusion over the differences between specific types of programs, especially wilderness camps and boot camps. Some programs that advertise as “wilderness therapy programs” may actually be boot camps run in a wilderness environment. One of the major differences between wilderness camps and boot camps is the underlying theoretical framework of the programs. Wilderness camps are grounded in experiential learning that advocates “learning by doing” and facilitates opportunities for personal growth, while boot camps are informed by a military model and involve the use of physical and psychological aggression against juveniles. In addition, the evaluation research on wilderness camps has generally shown promising or mixed results, while evaluations of boot camps have shown mixed results—in particular that they are not as effective at reducing recidivism or changing youths’ behavior (Russell 2001).

In addition, a lack of a standard definition of residential programs, including wilderness camps, has contributed to serious issues in the oversight of these programs. The GAO launched an investigation into allegations of abuse and death in residential treatment programs for troubled youth. The investigations found thousands of cases and allegations of child abuse and neglect (GAO 2007). The report noted that ineffective management and negligent operating practices led to many cases where youths were abused or even killed (see the literature on Residential for further information on the GAO findings).

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One specific measure that was taken against wilderness camp programs as results of the GAO report came from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Federal Government department that manages public lands and waters. The BLM issued an Instrument Memorandum (IM) to wilderness therapy or residential treatment programs that operate on public lands under Special Recreation Permits. The IM addressed concerns from the GAO report and issued numerous special requirements as a result of the findings of abuse and neglect at residential programs. One of the special requirements would deny applications for a permit to wilderness therapy programs that operate on public lands in States without licensing or regulation of these programs, because the BLM does not have the personnel or expertise to provide the necessary oversight (BLM 2008).

Target Population

The target population of wilderness camps varies by location. In a survey of therapeutic wilderness programs, Fuentes and Burns (2002) found that program participants ranged from 11 to 17 years old, though the vast majority of participants were older teenagers. Program participants were predominately male and white, with a mix of nonviolent and violent offenses. Most of the programs often excluded females and juveniles convicted of sexual offenses (Fuentes and Burns 2002).

Theoretical Foundation

Generally, wilderness camps seek to rehabilitate youth by concentrating on three risk factors of delinquency: external locus of control, low self-esteem, and poor interpersonal skills (Wilson and Lipsey, 2000). The risk factors are supported by longitudinal studies (Hawkins and Catalano 1992; Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry 1992) that have found correlations (though not a causal relationship) between psychological and interpersonal adjustment and delinquent behavior. Recent reviews of previous studies (Hawkins et al. 1998; Lipsey and Derzon 1998) have also supported the association between psychological and interpersonal factors and delinquency.

Antisocial and delinquent behaviors of youths are ameliorated through two dimensions of experiential learning: mastery of 1) physical activities and 2) interpersonal interactions.

The physical activities of wilderness camps are usually unfamiliar and demanding, presenting challenging problems with clear consequences of failure. By mastering the difficult activities, program participants experience success and achievement that translate into positive attitudinal and behavior changes through increases in confidence and self-esteem and a more internalized locus of self-control (Wilson and Lipsey 2000). The newly empowered youth is presumably less likely to commit future delinquent acts.

The second dimension, interpersonal interactions, takes place through the group orientation of wilderness camps. Although some physical activities can be completed by youths on their own, other activities require cooperation and communication in a group setting. Youths learn prosocial and interpersonal skills that can be applied to life outside the program through positive and cooperative interaction with team leaders and supportive peers during the activities (Tarolla et al. 2002; Wilson and Lipsey 2000).

Outcome Evidence

While military-style boot camps have consistently failed to demonstrate any positive impact on juvenile offenders' recidivism rates, the data on wilderness camps is more encouraging. Wilson and Lipsey's meta-analysis (2000) of 29 different studies of wilderness programs, involving more than 3,000 juvenile offenders, indicates that program participants experience recidivism rates that are about 8 percentage

points lower than comparison subjects (29 percent versus 37 percent). However, these moderately positive results do not reflect the marked inconsistencies in individual program results. The results from the meta-analysis also show that programs involving a combination of relatively intense physical activity and therapeutic enhancement such as individual counseling, family therapy, and therapeutic group sessions were especially effective, while those that involved less physically challenging activities and little or no therapeutic content made a less significant impact.

One of the best-known and most studied wilderness programs in the United States is VisionQuest. Founded in 1973, this national program provides alternatives to incarceration for serious juvenile offenders. VisionQuest youths typically spend 12 to 15 months in various challenging outdoor impact and therapeutic treatment programs. A normal treatment course often includes a 3-month stay at a wilderness orientation program (where the youths live in tepees or comparable primitive conditions), a 5-month adventure program (during which juvenile offenders can embark on wagon train odysseys, cross country biking trips, or ocean voyages), and a 5-month community residential/therapeutic program. The program also features an aftercare program called HomeQuest that offers support to youths and families upon reentry.

Controlled studies of VisionQuest have consistently demonstrated its efficacy in lowering participants' recidivism rates. One evaluation, performed by the RAND Corporation in the 1980s (Greenwood and Turner 1987), found that VisionQuest graduates consistently outperformed a control group from a conventional correctional facility, despite the fact that the VisionQuest group contained more serious offenders. When differences in group characteristics were statistically controlled, VisionQuest youths were about half as likely as subjects in the control group to be rearrested after 1 year (Howell 1998).

Limitations of Research

Other studies of wilderness camps have found that they are as effective as or more effective than traditional institutionalization at reducing recidivism rates (Roberts 2004). Despite such promising results, numerous questions about the efficacy of wilderness programs remain unanswered. Wilson and Lipsey (2000) found that the length of wilderness programs seemed to have an inverse effect on treatment results (i.e., the longer the program, the less chance of its achieving statistically significant results on treatment outcomes). Such a finding seems counterintuitive and puzzling in light of the success of some long-term programs, such as VisionQuest. Additional studies have also noted that, thus far, the majority of participants in wilderness programs have been white male juvenile offenders. Little is known about the program's effectiveness with African Americans, Hispanics, and females. Additional research is still required to conclusively demonstrate the efficacy of such programs across different treatment types and diverse target populations (Fuentes and Burns 2002). Further research is also needed to improve the methodological rigor of evaluation studies looking at the effectiveness of wilderness camps. Future program evaluations should incorporate stronger study designs, such as randomly controlled trial, to ensure internal validity of the results. Studies should also examine the particular components of wilderness camps that contribute to positive effects on participants.

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