

Classroom Learning Activities

Steve Langsner, Editor
University of Arkansas

Put Crime Back in the Classroom: Introducing Criminology and Justice in the Leisure Studies Curriculum

Patricia S. Ardovino
University of Wisconsin at La Crosse

Introduction

The leisure services profession appears to be spending energy and time discussing and researching individuals who are at risk for criminal behavior. Specifically, there appears to be an interest in youth at risk by leisure professionals, leisure scholars, and students majoring in leisure studies. Leisure educators may have an opportunity to discuss youth at risk in a variety of leisure studies courses. Topics that can easily incorporate a discussion on youth at risk include: the leisure elements of risk and boredom, leisure across the lifespan, popular culture, leisure and deviant behavior, leisure and taboo behavior, and the history of parks and recreation. Since this discussion is not usually more than an introduction to youth at risk, interested students may enroll in a course typically offered in the criminology, sociology, or psychology curriculum that focuses on deviant youth or juvenile delinquency.

Leisure educators interested in going beyond an introduction to youth at risk might examine this population more thoroughly by incorporating the basic definitions of criminology and justice, and basic theories of crime, and by incorporating the following learning activity.

Learning Activity

This learning activity requires students to explain the criminal behavior of a notorious criminal by citing specific theories of crime. The activity requires a good grasp and appropriate application of criminological theories. John Dillinger is used in this example but there are many criminal personalities to choose from. Students read and review the specific theories of crime, and are assigned to read a short 17 page narrative of the life and times of John Dillinger called “Johnny Boy” Bardsley & May, 2000). Students must then explain the criminal behavior of Dillinger by applying their assigned theory (demonological, biological, psychiatric/psychological, or social). It is surprising to see

how strongly and conscientiously students use their assigned theories to argue the case for Dillinger's criminal behavior. "Dillinger didn't have an attachment to his parents or teachers....Dillinger's family had a history of medical problems....Dillinger was abused by his father." And of course, "the devil made him do it." Students begin to conclude that no one theory can explain criminal behavior. The question now posed to students is how to explain the behavior of people who grew up in similar circumstances and didn't commit any felonies. At this point, resiliency theory can be introduced.

Outcomes and Recommendations

It might be easy for students in the field of leisure studies to believe that leisure programs such as wilderness camps, rope courses, after school programs, and midnight basketball will deter the criminal behavior of youth who are at risk for entering the criminal justice system. But students need to be reminded that like all human behavior, criminal behavior is complex. Students should understand that the provision of leisure activities is just one piece of the puzzle for deterring criminal behavior, albeit an important piece.

This assignment is particularly useful to students who see only the "black and white" of criminal behavior of youth at risk, or who believe that the inappropriate use of leisure time invariably leads to crime. By exploring basic concepts and theories of crime, they can recognize that there are no quick explanations of criminal behavior and no quick fixes. Students should be reminded that leisure programming for these youth should not fall into a mentality of "one size fits all." These leisure programs need to be meaningful and well thought out. It is to be hoped that an examination of the basic definitions and theories of crime will promote these types of programs.

References

Bardsley, M., & May, A. (2000). John Dillinger {Electronic version}. *The Crime Library*.