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## Background and Organization of the Book<sup>1</sup>

*Presenter:*

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### Background

The problems created by youth dropping out of school, using drugs or alcohol, joining gangs, becoming teenage parents, and being involved in antisocial and delinquent acts are widely recognized. Many agencies, e.g., educational, social service, law enforcement, recreational, and health, are responding to these issues through targeted prevention and intervention strategies. With the problems created by at-risk youth emerging as a central concern in many communities, there are increasing pressures on the political system to do something about them.

The pressure of dealing with these problems offers an opportunity for recreation and park departments to position themselves (Crompton, 1993) so they are perceived to be alleviating a problem which is a prevailing political concern of the public and those policymakers who are responsible for allocating tax funds. The field has a distinguished heritage in this area. Indeed, a primary cornerstone upon which public recreation services were founded was the belief that recreation can make a substantive contribution to alleviating the impact of nonproductive, personally destructive, and/or antisocial actions by youth. Positioning themselves to address the at-risk youth issue requires agencies to move beyond a fun and games mandate, under which they offer programs that enhance participation in

leisure for its own sake, to a problem-solving mandate requiring that programs contribute to ameliorating societal problems. This shift in orientation facilitates public recreation and park services being seen positively as part of the solution to a community's problems, rather than negatively as a drain on the tax resources of its general fund.

Recognition of the magnitude of the challenge presented by at-risk youth has sparked a renaissance of interest in this issue among some park and recreation agencies. The prospect in the immediate future is that many more agencies will be involved in developing services in this area. Unfortunately, relatively little information is currently available about programs and services for at-risk youth being offered by park and recreation agencies. The dearth of information makes it difficult for those agencies already offering services to refine and improve them, and for agencies seeking to initiate programs to know how to develop them most effectively.

With this need in mind, the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration initiated efforts to increase information available about recreation services for at-risk youth. These efforts were consistent with the Academy's mission which is to advance knowledge related to the administration of recreation and parks, to encourage scholarly efforts by both practitioners and educators that enhance the practice of park and recreation

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<sup>1</sup> Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.  
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administration, and to promote broader public understanding of the importance of parks and recreation to the public good. Its membership is comprised of approximately 125 elected members who have served for at least fifteen years in a high level of park and recreation administration or as a senior educator in the field.

The efforts of the Academy led to a cooperative project with the National Recreation and Park Association; the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University; and the Fort Worth Parks and Community Services Department to convene a Colloquium in Fort Worth, Texas, on the theme Recreation for At-Risk Youth: Programs that Work. One hundred and forty invited participants from approximately 80 agencies in the United States and Canada attended the Colloquium, with 37 participants providing lead case examples.

The intent of this book is to build on the presentations made at the Colloquium and to provide state-of-the-art information other communities can use to improve or initiate their own services in this area. The case studies which constitute this book are based on written papers which were prepared by Colloquium presenters. The editors have supplemented these papers with information gleaned from tapes of the presentations and discussions and from extensive additional background resources derived from files, newspapers, reports or other materials which were supplied by the presenters. Efforts were made to check with presenters that the edited material accurately portrayed their programs, but any errors contained in the volume remain the responsibility of the editors.

## Organization of the Book

The book is organized into sections that group together cases that address similar issues. In the second chapter, the editors have attempted to provide an overview of the commonalities and major themes that emerged from the case studies.

In Section II, case studies are presented for five cities which have had relatively long experience and an extensive array of programs targeted at at-risk youth. The city of Commerce, California, with a population of 12,000, offers an extraordinary range of programs and a thorough holistic approach aimed at preventing the gang warfare in adjacent Los Angeles from spilling over into its community. Commerce demonstrates that full-spectrum programs need not be confined to large cities. Of the remaining cities in Section II, Anaheim is a medium-sized community, while Minneapolis, Phoenix, and Seattle all are larger cities. All four provide case studies of model at-risk

youth programs which other municipal recreation and park departments may want to emulate.

When the political forces enable and/or direct a recreation and park agency to concentrate more resources on at-risk youth, the temptation often is to plunge unilaterally ahead and implement programs that agency staff anticipate might work. This approach fails to recognize that a comprehensive thrust in this area cannot be successful without the involvement of other stakeholders seeking to impact at-risk youth, such as residents in affected neighborhoods, community leaders, business interests, nonprofit organizations, and other public agencies. The five case studies which constitute Section III focus on mobilizing and organizing multiple resources in the community to address the issue. They offer a wide variety of approaches to achieving this and illustrate that local circumstances dictate which is likely to be most successful in a particular context.

The times at which youth are most at-risk are those when they are not in school. In Section IV, three time blocks are recognized: after school (and teacher training days); summer; and evening/late night. The case studies in this section discuss six programs that focus on the after-school period, four summer programs, and two which cover both of these time periods. In addition, three evening/late night programs are presented.

Case studies in Section V describe efforts in Boulder, Colorado, and in Columbus, Mississippi, targeted at public housing areas, and a program organized by Calgary Parks and Recreation which aims to keep youth who are identified as likely high school dropout candidates in school.

In Section VI, particularly innovative programs are featured. Most of them are nontraditional. The programs represent responses to needs which have emerged by thinking outside the envelope. They are testimony to the creativity and imagination which some recreation agencies exhibit in addressing the needs of at-risk youth.

Problems associated with at-risk youth are not unique to North America. Section VII includes two cases from other countries. In the "new" South Africa, a very large proportion of African youth are both uneducated and unemployed. In some areas they have been exposed to violence for much of their lives. The situation was explained to the Colloquium by a senior South African official, an invited guest of the Colloquium organizers. Finally, one of the editors reports on a widely adopted program in the United Kingdom, where youth who are placed on probation for the first time by the juvenile court system have the opportunity to participate in

recreation programs. These are staffed by recreation professionals, funded by the probation service, and used as a vehicle to rehabilitate and direct youth away from further deviant or illegal behavior.

### **References**

Crompton, J. L. (1993). Repositioning recreation and park services: An overview. *Trends*, 30(4), 2-5.