

# EVALUATING THE EFFECTS OF THE WENDIGO LAKE EXPEDITION PROGRAM ON YOUNG OFFENDERS

Keith C. Russell

*University of Minnesota*

*This study reports an evaluative case study of Wendigo Lake Expeditions (WLE), a continuous intake, open custody program for young offenders that uses a positive youth development approach. Four objectives guided the case study: (a) describe and illustrate WLE's approach to working with adjudicated youth, (b) identify and report perceptions of the program and process, (c) assess changes in their well-being utilizing the Youth-Outcome Questionnaire (Y-OQ), and (d) track postprogram recidivism rates. Results indicated a significant improvement in youth well-being indicated by significant score reductions on the Y-OQ. Of the 40 youths contacted at the follow-up assessment, 21 (53%) had been charged with a criminal offense during this period, including those charged for administrative offences such as breaching conditions of probation, whereas 19 (47%) had not been charged. Implications of positive youth development programming for adjudicated youth are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *adjudicated youth; positive youth development; outcome evaluation*

The past decades have seen a steady rise in youth participation in and severity of high-risk behaviors such as irresponsible sexual activity, violence, and alcohol, drug, and tobacco use (Stevens & Griffin, 2001). The latest risk survey of youth in the United States indicates that youth are not simply experimenting in risk behaviors but rather forming, at an alarmingly early age, ingrained life habits that are detrimental to their life success (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Though the number of juvenile arrests have declined 17.5% during the years 1994 to 2003, several types of arrests have shown increases. These include assault (+10%), drug abuse violations (+19%), driving under the influence (+33%) and disorderly conduct (+13%; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Moreover, researchers have called the recidivism, revocation, and recommitment of juvenile parolees "unacceptably high" (Wiebush, Wagner, McNulty, Wang, & Le, 2005), with some studies reporting that more than 90% of juvenile offenders had been arrested as adults and approximately two thirds had been sentenced to prison (Office of the Auditor, 1995). As these trends continue, juvenile justice systems are recognizing the need for change and searching for alternative programming to address issues of violence and substance use in juvenile justice populations (Latessa, 2004; Wolford, 2000).

Adjudicated youth are characterized as younger than the age of the majority who have violated the law or committed a status offense and have been processed through the juvenile justice system in some way. There are several contributing factors common to juvenile offenders, such as ethnic minority status, aggressive and antisocial behavior, difficulties in