Faith-Based Approaches for Controlling the Delinquency of Juvenile Offenders

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THERE HAS BEEN growing interest in developing faith-based initiatives to address multiple human service needs. Much of this interest stems from President George W. Bush's emphasis on the value of faith-based initiatives and the allocation of funding for their development. As recently as October 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded $58,025,562 to 420 grass-roots faith-based and community organizations to provide a range of services, including those designed to aid homeless persons, empower at-risk youth, and promote healthy marriages (www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/). The correlation between religiosity and reductions in areas such as hypertension, depression, substance abuse, suicide, non-marital child bearing, and delinquency (Johnson, Tompkins, & Webb, 2002; Johnson, 2001) suggests that faith-based programming may help address these critical needs. In many cases, however, "faith-based" services have little to do with religion; they are, instead, secular services that are provided by a religiously affiliated organization.

Certainly, faith-based programming has a long tradition in the corrections field. The first correctional institutions, implemented by the Quakers, were premised upon the belief that incarceration should be a period of hard work and solitude in which offenders reflected upon their crimes, read the Bible, and become penitent of their "sinful" ways (O'Connor, 2002). Likewise, the motivation to preserve delinquent and wayward children was often derived from the religious faith of child care advocates interested in saving children from the detrimental effects of the Houses of Refuge, jails, and abandonment to the city streets.

The purpose of this article is to examine the merits of faith-based approaches for the prevention and control of delinquency within community-based services for juvenile offenders. There is substantial empirical support for an inverse relationship between religious involvement and delinquency in youth and criminal behavior in adults (Carr, Cuff, & Molzahn, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Johnson, n.d.; Johnson, Tompkins, & Webb, 2002; Larson and Johnson, n.d.; Rohrbaugh and Jessor, 1975; Jang & Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Jang, Larson, & Li, 2001). Is this evidence enough to support the use of faith-based approaches for government-run, youth-serving agencies operated within a social context that places such emphasis on religious freedom and the separation of church and state? Are faith-based approaches practical and ethical solutions for addressing delinquency and other antisocial behaviors? As a starting point for exploring these

questions, this paper examines the theoretical and empirical relevance of faith-based approaches for the prevention and control of delinquency, highlights the controversies surrounding their use, and reports the results of a survey of juvenile justice personnel regarding their perceptions on using faith-based programming for the youth they serve.

Literature Review

The literature on faith-based programming distinguishes between "organic" and "intentional" religion (Johnson et al., 2002). Johnson et al. (2002) define organic religion as representing "the influence of religion practiced over time" and intentional religion as "the exposure to religion one receives at a particular time in life for a particular purpose" (p. 8). There have been numerous studies that have examined the impact of organic religion on physical health, mental health, delinquency, and crime, while far fewer have assessed the effects of intentional religion (Johnson et al., 2002). In general, individuals of "high organic religion" experience less hypertension, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, have lower rates of suicide, non-marital child bearing, and delinquency (Johnson et al., 2002; Johnson, 2001). Johnson et al. (2002) postulate that "if a relationship can be established between religious practice and overall health and well being, then there may be additional justification for assuming that intentional religion via faith-based organizations may yield similar outcomes..."(p. 9).

There is certainly a strong theoretical basis for why one would expect to find an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency. Social control, social learning, and cognitive theories are all capable of explaining this link. Social control theory is based upon the assumption that deviant or delinquent behavior is a natural, human tendency that is constrained by internal controls (morals and guilt) and external controls (social bonds, punishment, and laws) (Hirschi, 1969; Reckless, 1967). Religion functions as a control agent in several ways. It provides youth with an attachment to a positive social institution and its members, and provides opportunities for involvement in conventional activities. The more attached a person is to a religious institution, "the less likely he or she is to commit crime, for he or she has something of value to lose..." (O'Connor and Perreyclear, 2002, p. 19). Worthington (1993) contends that "religious doctrine and participation reinforce and strengthen internalization of moral beliefs, which in turn, foster restraint through...feelings of moral revulsion and guilt" (as cited in Benda, 1995 p. 447). According to Rohrbaugh and Jessor (1975) one's perception of God can function as a control agent: If one views God as wrathful, deviant behavior is inhibited out of fear of punishment; if one views God as loving, God is an ideal, whose character is to be emulated in one's own life.

Social learning theory maintains that individuals are less likely to commit a delinquent or criminal act when they are exposed to pro-social models, when they learn definitions unfavorable to law violation, and when they are reinforced for their demonstration of prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Akers, 2003). Involvement in a religious institution increases the likelihood that youth will be exposed to prosocial models whom they can emulate. These models, along with religious text, sermons, and counseling, offer general definitions (i.e., beliefs, values, and norms) that are unfavorable to criminal behavior.

Cognitive theory also provides an explanation for the inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency. Criminal offenders and delinquents are disproportionately represented in the pre-conventional stage of moral development (Jennings, Kilkenny, and Kohlberg, 1983). At this stage, decisions that an individual makes are predicated upon the desire to avoid punishment and carrying out one's self interests, with no concern as to the welfare of others (Van Voorhis, Braswell, & Lester, 2004). In contrast, individuals at the conventional stage of reasoning are internally motivated to do that which is expected of them; they try to live by the rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and seek to preserve conventional, pro-social institutions (Van Voorhis et al., 2004). Consistent exposure to religious models and religious doctrines that emphasize morality and reciprocity may help youth progress from preconventional to conventional reasoning and lessen their likelihood of engaging in antisocial or other behaviors

that serve their self-interests at the expense of others.

In addition to this theoretical support for religion as a delinquency prevention tool, there is a significant amount of empirical support, primarily as it relates to the inverse correlation between organic religion and delinquency (Baier and Wright, 2001; Carr, et al. 2003; Jang & Johnson, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Johnson, n.d.; Johnson et al., 2002; Larson and Johnson, n.d.; Rohrbaugh and Jessor, 1975). This relationship has been challenged, with many authors asserting that it is actually an indirect relationship that is completely mediated by social bond, social learning and other secular variables. Some studies have found that religiosity becomes non-significant after controlling for social bonding and social learning variables (e.g., Benda, 1995; Burkett & Warren, 1987; Elifson, Petersen, & Hadaway, 1983). Several other evaluations, however, have found that although the relationship is mediated by social control and social learning variables, the relationship between religiosity and delinquency remains statistically significant (Larson and Johnson, n.d.;. Johnson et al., 2001; Jang and Johnson, 2001).

Benda and Corwyn (1997) conclude that the impact of religiosity depends upon the indicators used to measure religiosity, whether social bonding variables are considered, and the type of delinquency analyzed. For example, Adlaf and Smart (1985) found that church attendance is more substantially related to drug use than self-reported religious feelings, and Benda (1995) found that religiosity is more influential on anti-ascetic conduct (e.g., substance abuse, gambling, sexual promiscuity) than on property or person crimes.

A review of studies on faith-based programs (i.e., intentional religion) in correctional settings reports positive outcomes, including reductions in violence, recidivism, and disciplinary infractions, and improvements in literacy and prison adjustment (Clear and Sumpter, 2002; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway & Burton, 1995; Johnson et al., 2002; O'Connor & Perryclear, 2002). It should be noted, however, that many of these studies possess methodological flaws, including small sample size and a lack of clearly defined control groups. Furthermore, these studies involve univariate, descriptive analysis of the relationship between program involvement and program outcomes. Despite methodological shortcomings, Johnson et al. (2002) conclude that preliminary findings of evaluations of faith-based programs are promising and that there are apparent advantages of such programming in helping individuals prevail over difficult conditions.

Clearly, more research is needed to assess the viability of intentional religion, or faith-based programming, as a delinquency prevention tool. Additional empirical support for faith-based programming, however, can be found in research on resiliency and protective factors. Researchers have found that supportive relationships with adults buffer the effects of high-risk environments by providing a sense of "felt-security" (Bretherton, 1985; Mecartney, Styles, and Morrow, 1994), by improving a youth's self-concept (Unger and Wandersman, 1985), and by promoting self-efficacy (Werner, 1993). In this vein, many authors assert that urban youth who are involved in religion are able to partially negate the influence of the disordered neighborhoods in which they live as the result of time spent engaged in pro-social activities and exposed to responsible adults (Larson and Johnson, n.d.; Jang and Johnson, 2001; Title and Welch, 1983).

There are three primary points of controversy surrounding the use of faith-based approaches. The first issue concerns the separation between church and state. By using faith-based programming as a tool for preventing delinquency, will an agency be in violation of the establishment clause of the first amendment? According to Johnson et al. (2002), agencies using faith-based approaches have not yet been challenged on the basis of constitutional violations against freedom of religion. The second issue revolves around the potential for discriminatory practices that would exclude agnostic or atheistic youth, or youth that practice a religion other than that practiced by the program, from participating in the program. The third point of controversy reflects the state of the research on faith-based programming. If, as some research suggests, the benefits of faith-based programming are derived from the secular variables of social bonds and social learning, it might make sense, considering the aforementioned controversies, to expose youth to these factors through programs operated outside of a religious context.

The extent to which religiosity and faith-based programming have value in juvenile corrections

may be proportionate to its place within the "what works" paradigm. According to the "what works" literature, effective programs are those that address criminogenic needs (or dynamic risk factors), accommodate the personal characteristics and learning styles of youth, and use cognitive-behavioral and social learning approaches to reduce delinquent and other antisocial behaviors (see Andrews, Bonta, and Hoge,1990; Gendreau, 1996). There are three ways that faith-based interventions reflect this literature. First, Carr et al. (2003) assert that religiosity, specifically faith-based programming, can appreciably affect the seven dynamic risk factors for criminal behavior, which are employment, family life, antisocial associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal or emotional orientations (including cognitive distortions), and antisocial attitudes. Second, the religious preference of youth and their families may be an important factor to consider when matching youth to programs, as it may make them more or less amenable to faith-based programming. Third, as previously discussed, religion or faith-based programming can aid the moral development of individuals, and expose youth to positive role models that can demonstrate prosocial behavior and reinforce the pro-social behavior exhibited by youth.

Despite the theoretical and empirical support that exists for faith-based programming, little is known about the extent to which faith-based approaches are being used by juvenile justice agencies or about their attitudes regarding such approaches. The remainder of this article reports on a survey of juvenile justice personnel in a southern state regarding their perceptions of using faith-based approaches with juvenile offenders. Specifically, the survey was designed to explore the:

- extent to which juvenile probation officers are aware of and utilizing faith-based services for the youth they serve;
- perceptions of juvenile probation officers regarding the value of faith-based interventions; and
- perceptions of juvenile probation officers regarding barriers to faith-based approaches.

Methodology

The survey was administered to 203 community service workers (i.e., juvenile probation officers) employed with the State via e-mail using the SPSS Data Entry System. This system streamlines data collection by using SPSS functions to create the survey and collect and analyze the data. After creating the survey with the SPSS Data Entry Builder, the Data Entry System software electronically and automatically distributes the survey through e-mail. Respondents submit their responses to the survey electronically and transfer the data back to the Data Entry Enterprise Server. Through this collection process, data is summarily organized and prepared for analysis in SPSS (http://www.spss.com/data entry/). Although participation was encouraged through an accompanying email from a juvenile justice administrator, recipients were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

The advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires administered via e-mail are comparable to those associated with questionnaires sent by regular mail. Advantages include cost effectiveness, timeliness, anonymity, and accessibility. Additionally, respondents can also complete the survey in a time and manner that is convenient for them, and interviewer bias is minimized. Unfortunately, there are also a number of disadvantages associated with self-administered questionnaires. They have the lowest response rates and there is often the problem of surveys that are returned incomplete or filled out incorrectly. In addition, researchers cannot observe the respondents' environments, cannot control the circumstances or conditions under which the survey is completed, or probe to refine ambiguous answers. Moreover, inclusion of complex questions and contingency questions is limited (Babbie, 2004). An additional disadvantage associated with online surveys is that they limit participation to those with email capacity (Babbie, 2004). This was not a concern in this study, however, because all members of the target

population had regular access to their e-mail account through their work. To encourage a high response rate, the survey was distributed on three separate occasions.

For the purposes of the survey, faith-based programming was defined as "any program, service, or intervention that connects youth to a religious organization, church (Synagogue, mosque, sweat lodge, etc.), or church member for the purpose of preventing future delinquency or other problem behaviors." Although the questionnaire consisted predominantly of close-ended questions, it also contained a number of open-ended questions to allow for further comment. Respondents were asked about their awareness and use of faith-based approaches with the youth they serve, their perceptions about the effectiveness of these approaches, and perceived barriers to using faith-based approaches with juvenile offenders.

In an attempt to contextualize the results of the survey, respondents were asked about their demographic characteristics, educational and employment background, correctional philosophies, and personal perspectives and experiences with religion. Items on religious/spiritual background were taken from a scale developed by O'Connor (2002), and the scale on religious views was developed by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989) and has demonstrated reliability and validity (Egbert, Mickley, & Coeling, 2004; Hill & Hood, 1999). As this survey is exploratory in purpose and nature, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics.

Results

Description of Sample

Seventy surveys were completed and returned for a response rate of 34 percent. The typical respondent was female (58.57 percent), approximately 40 years old, and Caucasian (85.71 percent). Most were raised in a small town of less than 50 thousand (32.86 percent), in the country (non-farm) (21.43 percent), or on a farm (22.86 percent). The respondents were well educated in diverse fields of study. A Bachelor's degree was the highest degree earned for 70 percent of the respondents, while another 25 percent had earned their Master's degree. Fields of study ranged from the Arts, History, and Science to Psychology, Social Work, and Criminal Justice.

On average, respondents had worked in the social services for 10.62 years, and had been with the Department of Juvenile Justice for 6.51 years. Respondents' perceptions regarding the most important goals of juvenile corrections were consistent with traditional juvenile justice philosophy: 67.14 percent of respondents ranked rehabilitation as the most important goal of juvenile corrections. Restoration was considered the second most important goal, followed by deterrence and incapacitation. Retribution was viewed as the least important goal.

Eighteen percent (n=13) of the respondents reported prior experience working with faith-based organizations, and 10 percent (n=7) of the respondents reporting having received training on faith-based approaches for preventing delinquency. The majority (77.14 percent) reported frequent church attendance (once a week or more) throughout their childhood, and 51.43 percent of respondents attended church once a week or more at the time of their response. A large majority of respondents (81.43 percent) identified themselves as Christian, Protestant. Religious faith is a salient factor in the majority of respondents' lives: Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that they base most of their important decisions on their religious faith; 58.57 percent indicated that their faith is of central importance in their lives; and 72.85 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that without their faith, their lives would not possess much meaning. These items were combined into a religious salience scale (Gorsuch and McPherson, 1989) ranging from 0 (low religious salience) to 10 (high religious salience). The mean score was 8.01.

Awareness, Use, and Perceived Effectiveness of Faith-Based Programming

The data suggest that the majority of juvenile service workers who responded to the survey were

unaware of existing faith-based opportunities for youth (Table 1). The types of faith-based programs that workers were most aware of and to which they made the most referrals were individual mental health counseling, drug and alcohol education, community service, and mentoring. Although considerably fewer workers were aware of a faith-based anger management program or family intervention services, these programs received among the highest rates of referrals. Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of the faith-based programs of which they were aware on a scale of 1 (not effective at all) to 5 (very effective). The mean scores ranged from a low of 2.92 for individual mental health counseling to a high of 4.33 for educational services.

Table 2

Purpose of faith-based approaches

When asked why they personally use faith-based approaches with the youth they service, the most commonly selected responses were to provide a positive environment for social learning (35.71 percent), to develop a network of social support (34.28 percent), and to expose youth to pro-social standards of behavior (34.28 percent). When asked to rank the purposes of faith-based approaches in terms of their importance in preventing future delinquency, respondents most frequently ranked "exposing youth to pro-social standards of behavior" as the most important. Enhancing a youth's personal spirituality/religiosity was most frequently considered the least important reason to use faith-based approaches with juvenile offenders.

Most respondents agreed that a significant proportion of youth that they serve could benefit from participation in faith-based programming (Table 3). Despite this, they believed that few would voluntarily participate in such programming. Moreover, a strong majority of juvenile service workers responded that fewer than twenty percent of their clients currently attend church.

Barriers to faith-based approaches

Of the barriers listed in the survey, respondents most frequently identified legislative requirements regarding the separation of church and state (68.57 percent), the lack of availability of faith-based programming (60 percent), resistance from family and/or youth (55.71 percent), and lack of awareness of faith-based programming (50 percent) as barriers that limit their use of faith-based approaches (table 4). Only 2.86 percent of respondents identified their own negative attitudes regarding the value of faith-based initiatives as a barrier. Despite this, respondents indicated that in the absence of such barriers, their use of faith-based programming would not increase at all (48.5 percent) or increase only a little (42.86 percent).

Summary and Conclusions

The majority of respondents to this survey were Caucasion, from small towns and/or rural areas, identified themselves as Christian, Protestant, and indicated that religious faith was a salient factor in their lives. Most respondents had worked in juvenile justice or some type of social service for at least five years. Few had received any training on faith-based approaches for preventing delinquency, and the reported levels of awareness and use of faith-based programming was low. Although the majority of respondents believed that faith-based programming could benefit the youth they served, few indicated that they would increase their use of faith-based programming even if perceived barriers were addressed. These results suggest that, despite the emphasis on faith-based programming at the federal level, its appeal had not permeated into juvenile justice practice within the southern state involved in this study.

Clearly, the low response rate and the predominant Christian orientation of the respondents limit the generalizability of the study results. There are several potential explanations for the low response rate. On a practical note, the juvenile service workers may just have been too busy to complete the survey. It is also possible, however, that the juvenile service workers chose not to respond because they considered the topic of the study to be too private and personal. Despite

precautions taken to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses, they may have been concerned about the lack of privacy that is often associated with agency email. Or it could be that their decision not to participate was due to a lack of interest in, or indifference to, faith-based programming.

Different results might be expected from a survey of juvenile justice workers within a state that is more diverse in race and religion. Persons with religious affiliations other than Christian may attach more value to faith-based programming. If we consider statistics showing that religious affiliation is more prevalent in southern states, however, a more logical assumption may be that even less value would be attached to faith-based programming in states outside of the southern region.

It is possible that the low awareness and use of faith-based programming, in general, was attributable to the population of youth served by the respondents. In this state, youth are only referred to the Department of Juvenile Justice after one or more attempts at diversion, and, in many cases, after they have accrued a lengthy record of status offenses and other problem behaviors. It may be that faith-based programming would garner more support as a primary prevention strategy.

Although the overall awareness and use of faith-based programming was low, there were higher rates of referrals to anger management and family interventions, both of which target problem areas that are prevalent within a more delinquent population. Moreover, the services that received higher rankings on perceived effectiveness included services that were more educational than clinical in nature, and were services that may have been deemed to be more suitable to the purview of religious organizations (e.g., services that targeted family, spirituality, sexuality, life skills).

To our knowledge, there is no prohibition against using faith-based services on a voluntary basis; if there were, numerous faith-based organizations currently serving offender populations would be in violation. On the contrary, it is the limited access to all types of religions that is more frequently challenged within the correctional context.

Respondents' perceptions regarding the most important aspects of faith-based programming—the positive environment for social learning, the network of social support, and the pro-social standards of behavior to which youth could be exposed—were congruent with research findings suggesting that it is the mediating variables within a faith-based context, rather than the religious or spiritual aspects themselves, that reduce a youth's likelihood of delinquency. It would appear to be a perfect solution for youth who so frequently lack these protective elements in their families and neighborhoods. The survey results reported here, however, suggest that it is an underutilized resource, at least within this one southern state.

Given the push for evidence-based practice in juvenile justice, the effectiveness of faith-based programming in reducing delinquency must be documented through methodologically sound outcome evaluations. Additionally, juvenile justice personnel must receive training on their value and legalities. Only then will faith-based programs become viable supplements or alternatives to secular programming for the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency.

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Type of Program	# (%) reporting awareness of program	Total estimated # of referrals in last 12 months	Average # of referrals in last 12 months (among those reporting awareness of program)	Perceived Effectiveness (1=not effective at all to 5=very effective; mean reported)
Table 1: Awareness of and Referral to Faith-Based Programming				
Mentoring	10 (14.28)	41	4.10	3.00
Drug/alcohol education	13 (18.57)	38.5	2.96	3.15
Drug/alcohol treatment	1 (1.43)	1	1.00	3.00
Educational services	6 (8.57)	6	1.00	4.33
Vocational training	2 (2.86)	4	2.00	3.00
Family intervention	7 (10.00)	34	4.86	4.17
Spiritual counseling	6 (8.57)	17	2.83	4.33
Services for teen pregnancy/parenting	8 (11.43)	3	.38	4.25
Sexual education/counseling	5 (7.14)	4	.80	3.75
Individual mental health counseling	15 (21.43)	64	4.27	2.92
Mental health groups	2 (2.86)	0	0	—
Community service	11 (15.71)	55	5.00	3.40
Anger management	5 (7.14)	42	8.40	3.25
Life skills training	3 (4.28)	2	.67	4.00
Recreational services	8 (11.43)	5	.63	3.33
Other	2 (2.86)	15	7.50	3.00

Table 2: Purposes of Faith-Based Approaches

Variable	Frequency(N)	Percentage(%)	Mean
Purposes			
Enhance religiosity/spirituality	9	12.86	
Provide positive environment for social learning	25	35.71	
Develop network of social support	24	34.28	
Structure leisure time	18	25.71	
Expose youth to pro-social standards of behavior	24	34.28	
Address specific problem area	16	22.86	
Ranking of Purposes in terms of Importance*			
Enhance religiosity/spirituality			3.97
1 most important	10	14.28	
2	5	7.14	
3	10	14.28	
4	6	8.57	
5	8	11.43	
6 least important	20	28.57	
Missing N=11			
Provide positive environment for social learning			2.77
1 most important	12	17.14	
2	15	21.43	
3	18	25.71	
4	9	12.86	
5	2	2.86	
6 least important	4	5.71	
Missing N=10			
Develop network of social support			2.86
1 most important	11	15.71	
2	17	24.28	
3	13	18.57	
4	7	10.00	

5	9	12.86	
6 least important	2	2.86	
Missing N=11			
Structure leisure time			3.40
1 most important	9	12.86	
2	12	17.14	
3	12	17.14	
4	8	11.43	
5	11	15.71	
6 least important	8	11.43	
Missing N=10			
Expose youth to pro-social standards			2.64
1 most important	19	27.14	
2	13	18.57	
3	9	12.86	
4	9	12.86	
5	6	8.57	
6 least important	3	4.28	
Missing N=11			
Address specific problem area			3.71
1 most important	10	14.28	
2	7	10.00	
3	8	11.43	
4	8	11.43	
5	15	21.43	
6 least important	10	14.28	
Missing N=12			

*Several respondents assigned the same rank multiple times.

Table 3: Participation of Youth in Faith-Based Programming		
Variable	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**
% of youth that could benefit		
Less than 20%	9	12.86
20-40%	9	12.86
41-60%	11	15.71
61-80%	12	17.14
Over 80%	27	38.57
Missing N=2		
% of youth that would be willing		
Less than 20%	23	32.86
20-40%	15	21.43
41-60%	20	28.57
61-80%	6	8.57
Over 80%	3	4.28
Missing N=3		
% of youth that attend church		
Less than 20%	58	82.86
20-40%	10	14.28
41-60%	0	0
61-80%	0	0
Over 80%	0	0
Missing N=2		

Table 4: Barriers to Faith-Based Approaches

Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Barriers perceived by juvenile service workers		
Legislative requirements regarding the separation of church and state	48	68.57
Philosophical arguments in favor of the separation of church and state	28	40.00
Agency regulations prohibiting their use	25	35.71
Lack of availability	42	60.00
Lack of awareness	35	50.00
Lack of program integrity	28	40.00
Pervasive negative attitudes toward their value in DJJ	16	22.86
Your own negative perceptions regarding their value	2	2.86
Resistance from family and/or youth	39	55.71
Other	10	14.28
Increase in the use of approaches in absence of barriers		
Not at all	34	48.57
A little	30	42.86
A lot	3	4.28
Missing N=3		

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