

Preface

The Rescue and Rehabilitation of Troubled Youth

Widely misunderstood by Americans, the juvenile justice system has as its ultimate goal rehabilitation of young offenders, while the primary goal of the adult system rests in meting out fair and just punishment for offenders.

Prior to 1900, juvenile and adult offenders were frequently incarcerated together and given similar treatment. After a long litany of sexual and other abuses of imprisoned youth, America finally woke up to the need for treating the two populations differently. Despite the establishment of the first juvenile court in the Chicago area in 1899, it was not until 1974 that Congress finally acted to pass the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJJPA). This law not only spoke strongly to the need for separating juveniles from adults for personal and public safety reasons, but it also went on to limit federal funding to those states that refused to comply with what were described as the “core requirements” of the act. Equally important, the JJJPA codified the overarching importance of prevention in heading off delinquent behavior before youth ever become ensnared in the juvenile justice system with its uncertain effects and results.

Prevention can take many forms. Of the many types of prevention programs, some are effective and others clearly are not. For example, studies have shown that programs that expose youth to incarcerated, hardened adult criminals in order to “scare

**Sixty-six percent of boys
and almost 75 percent of
girls in juvenile detention
have at least one
mental disorder.**

(The President's New Freedom
Commission on Mental Health, 2003)

them straight" are largely ineffective, while well-crafted and monitored mentoring programs frequently succeed in salvaging the lives of troubled youth. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of prevention is very difficult to measure and doesn't often generate compelling statistics

that can sustain program funding when budgets grow tight. As a result, dollars for prevention are the first to disappear in tough economic times, with the undesirable yet undeniable long-term result that even more dollars will be required later to build more prisons and correctional facilities to incarcerate juvenile offenders.

Virtually unknown to the average American but of paramount concern to juvenile justice and mental health practitioners is the fact that more than half of all juveniles committed to juvenile facilities have diagnosable mental disorders. Of these youth, up to 70 percent also suffer from some form of substance abuse, often from attempting to self-medicate to alleviate the effects of the mental illness.

**Untreated youth with
co-occurring disorders have
high rates of suicide,
medical problems,
homelessness,
unemployment, and
incarceration.**

(The President's New Freedom
Commission on Mental Health, 2003)

In many cases, parents of these troubled juveniles felt they had no choice but to surrender their children to the juvenile justice system and court jurisdiction because they couldn't afford to secure the needed mental health treatment.

In the extremely complex arena of juvenile justice, ongoing research must be a work in progress. In recent years, significant and widely authenticated scientific studies have demonstrated that brain development in adolescents is incomplete and slower than previously believed. In essence, adolescents lack the maturity to make certain decisions normally expected of adults. These findings support the conclusions of juvenile justice experts, who have long contended that youth think and act differently than adults and therefore need to be treated differently. For juvenile justice generally, such findings could explain why youth commit some of their crimes. They could also eventually have an impact on how juveniles accused of murder and other felonies are handled by the courts. Currently, juveniles accused of serious crimes are frequently prosecuted as adults and sometimes receive sentences of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Perhaps the single greatest quandary faced by juvenile justice experts today revolves around the disproportionate number of minority children being swept into the juvenile justice system. At virtually every step in the process, from law enforcement contacts to arrests and confinement, minorities enter the system in numbers much greater than their percentage of the general youth population. Throughout the United States, literally hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent to study why this situation exists and what steps can be implemented in our society and culture to correct it. Fortunately, some model programs have been developed that show real promise in lessening the disparity, but much additional work and effort is necessary. As poverty, dysfunctional families, domestic abuse, and many other factors have deepened the crises for our youth, easy solutions for their rescue and rehabilitation have remained elusive. The best hope remains the evidence-based programs that have been proven to work and can be replicated in different environments. This, in combination with committed professionals and volunteers working daily and

**African American youths are
more likely to be sent
to the juvenile justice system
for behavioral problems
than placed in
psychiatric care.**

(U.S. Public Health Service Report of the
Surgeon General's Conference on
Children's Mental Health, 2000)

tirelessly, will give many of our young people a second chance.

We cannot escape the fact that, for better or worse, like it or not, the kids of today will first weave and then become the fabric of tomorrow's society. These youth include uncounted numbers of economically, mentally, and morally chal-

lenged juveniles who desperately need a second chance, right now. Families and communities offer the best venue for hope; love, care, and respect remain the best medicine, rather than confinement. Where there is no other real family, or when the family can no longer cope, sometimes the right medicine can best be found in a caring group home, youth village—or a youth ranch.

—Bob Pence, member,
Colorado Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention Council,
past national chairman,
Coalition for Juvenile Justice,
Washington, D.C.