

Juvenile justice system: A crime against everyone?

Violent crime is increasing among children and teenagers, a University of Michigan researcher reports, but only a small portion of them are being held or rehabilitated.

"They are being arrested and released because the correctional facilities are too crowded—with much lesser offenders like shoplifting boys and promiscuous girls.

"National surveys provide no assurance that youth are being assigned among the states' correctional program in any rational manner according to the seriousness of their crime," U-M social work Prof. Robert D. Vinter told members of the American Correction Association at their annual meeting last week in Milwaukee.

"In fact, the data show that youngsters who commit 'status offenses' such as curfew violations or skipping school are as likely or more likely to be locked up as those who are guilty of serious crime," Vinter said.

The fault lies with discriminatory juvenile court judges and probation officers, Vinter states, and especially with state policy makers who have failed to set rational guidelines for their decisions.

"If we cannot comprehend how juvenile correction is actually functioning, how serious and deep-seated are its problems, then any attempt to change part of the system—such as policies for violent offenders—will certainly fail."

Vinter co-directed the National Assessment of Juvenile Corrections (NAJC) which was concluded last year at the U-M. The comprehensive five-year study uncovered wide disparities in correctional programs within and among the 50 states.

"Inconsistencies are everywhere—in the state and local structures for handling the juveniles; in the numbers and types of group homes or institutions available; in the juvenile codes themselves and their definitions of juvenile crime," Vinter said.

"Consequently, the chances of a youth being sent to a correctional facility was almost 20 times greater in some states than in others," Vinter stated.

"Another incongruity is that the patterns of juvenile institutionalization in the states bear no relation to the crime rate. In the period we studied, 1970-74, the nation's crime rate rose

by about 22 per cent. The population in adult jails and correctional facilities also increased, although by a lesser proportion.

"In contrast, the population of youths assigned to state correctional facilities fell by one-third during the same period, even though violent crime among juveniles increased by 49 per cent.

"It is evident that county and municipal governments largely withdrew from juvenile correction in recent years, probably due to budgetary pressures and state takeovers," Vinter said.

"Although the states have assumed responsibility for juvenile corrections programming, they have given it little attention. Across the country, its affairs are of low priority with all political parties, governors and legislative bodies," the U-M professor stated.

Individual states have tended to implement "far more rational" correctional policies for adults than for juvenile offenders, Vinter asserted. "Adult institutionalization practices are definitely linked to crime rates, especially violent crime," he reported. "Juvenile programming is not corre-

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—Prof. Robert D. Vinter

lated with rates of property crime, violent crime or the total of both."

What happens to the serious and violent juvenile offenders who are not being assigned to youth correctional programs? A further analysis found them—nearly 12,000 youths during each of the years under study—in adult jails and detention facilities awaiting court processing.

"Why should we find that crime rates are unrelated to the numbers of serious offenders in youth correctional programs but are strongly correlated to the numbers of youth in adult jails? Perhaps when crime—and public concern about it—rises, the local police and judiciary tends to respond rather vigorously and opts for immediate lock-up rather than long range rehabilitation," Vinter said.

"The real paradox, then, is in the populations of the youth corrections programs. These include closed institutions, open group homes or halfway houses, and non-residential day treatment centers, listed in order of decreasing security and operational costs.

"However, we found scant evidence of either," Vinter stated. "In NAJC's national sample of 42 juvenile institutions, halfway houses and day treatment centers throughout the country, only 15 per cent had been committed for person crimes; 58 per cent for combined person/property/drug offenses, and 42 per cent for status offenses, misdemeanors and parole violations.

"In the closed institutions, supposedly appropriate only for the most se-

vere offenders, 29 per cent were locked up for 'status offenses'—non-criminal acts such as unruly behavior and running away from home: Of the girls in institutions, a full 71 per cent were status offenders!

"These findings must raise grave questions about the states' juvenile correctional policies. Their non-rational assignment practices tends to displace serious offenders with a wide range of other types of youth. And at a very high cost.

"Among the grievous costs that must be reckoned, but cannot be estimated in dollars, are the very adverse effects of mixing minor and first offenders and more serious offenders in the same institutions," Vinter stressed.

"Closed institutions should be places of last resort, but they simply are not. It is no exaggeration to say that the majority of youths in most institutions in most states should not be there," he concluded.

"Spending upwards of \$25,000 per resident annually to incarcerate promiscuous girls and misdemeanant boys is an affront to sane public policy and common sense."

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