

Disparities in juvenile homes aired

America's juvenile correctional facilities are clogged with kids who can't get along with their parents—who skipped school, broke curfew or ran away from home.

More than one-third of the 1,837 youth in correctional programs sampled by the National Assessment of Juvenile Corrections (NAJC) were "status offenders" including nearly one-third of those in closed institutions. Many are confined side-by-side with youth who have committed arson, assault or armed robbery. A status offense is one that would not be considered a crime if committed by an adult.

For girls, who typically commit the less serious offenses, the percentage is even greater, according to University of Michigan social work Prof. Robert D. Vetter, codirector of the U-M-based study.

In addition, minority youth—especially blacks—are assigned to correctional programs far out of proportion to their numbers in the general population. Minority persons and females are underrepresented, however, he added, "among administrators and program staff."

The latest NAJC report, "Time Out: A National Study of Juvenile Correctional Programs," edited by Vetter with Theodore M. Newcomb and Ross K. Kahl, outlines the disparities in programs and policies within and among the states. Newcomb is U-M professor emeritus of sociology and psychology, and Kahl is NAJC administrative associate.

THE NAJC PROJECT, begun in 1971 under a grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U.S. Department of Justice, is the first comprehensive collection of national data on juvenile correctional programs.

Analyzing a wide range of institutions, group homes and non-residential treatment centers, the current report focuses on the youth, the staff and their view of the existing programs.

The typical NAJC youth is likely to be a male, non-white about 16 years of age and lower class, the authors stated. "He is no angel—he readily admits to drinking, using drugs and skipping school, but neither is he a hardened criminal."

"He has probably committed a minor property crime, although if female, it was likely a status offense." Male or female, the typical youth in the study has had considerable prior contact with the juvenile justice system.

THE U-M RESEARCHERS found little similarity among the youth grouped in a specific program, however. In most cases they varied in age, race, and the nature of offense.

"The institutions, considered the most severe corrections alternative, housed the largest proportion of serious offenders," the NAJC found. "But nearly a third of their populations were status offenders—persons whose conduct would not be considered a crime if committed by an adult."

"On the other hand, we were encouraged to find persons with serious offense histories being successfully handled by the more open and flexible group homes and day treatment centers without any marked concerns about misconduct or maintenance of order."

While the NAJC was not charged to evaluate the programs it surveyed, it evinces a strong preference for group home and day treatment alternatives. Highly structured, isolated and costly to operate, the institutions tend to exert more control over their charges. The U-M researchers found three-fourths of the institutions sampled has a discipline unit or access to one compared with only one-third of the group homes or day treatment centers.

THE STAFF MEMBERS NAJC interviewed in each of the three types of programs were very similar, they tended to be in their early 30's with 75 per cent white and 80 per cent male. About half have a college degree and more than five years of experience with children. Institutional staff range among the oldest, less educated and most experienced in the corrections field.

Different staff groups placed different emphasis on such objectives as having a close relationship with the youth, "providing needed education" and "maintaining discipline." But staff and executives of all programs ranked "treatment" above "custody," "community interaction" and other objectives as their preferred goal.

Some 1,300 institutional youth were also questioned in the study, and their responses offered some striking comparisons between "newcomers"—who had entered the program within the past four months and "veterans" who had been confined a year or more.

The percentage reporting offenses such as fighting, stealing or hitting a staff member increased steadily with the length of stay in the institution. Only 36 per cent of the newcomers but 64 per cent of the veterans say that since their arrival they have learned "many ways" to break the law. "Being a veteran in a predominantly veteran program is the most detrimental combination of circumstances," the NAJC concluded. "The more hardened a youth becomes after entering, the longer he or she is likely to stay. Our data suggest that the cause of this vicious circle is not the institution or its staff, but the youths' influence upon one another."

THESE FINDINGS further support the NAJC's call for the removal of status offenders from juvenile institutions. In fact, the U-M researchers strongly urged "major cutbacks in the numbers and sizes of closed institutions in almost every state."

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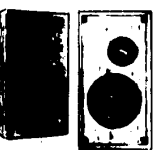
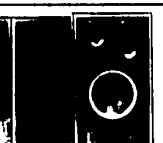
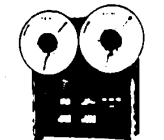
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