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A little human touch can go a long way toward improving the behavior of troubled youth. Or so believes Carl Oliver, the retired superintendent of a juvenile detention center just outside Washington, D.C.

Oliver tells the story of one youth under his care who, with some encouragement, became the institution's artist-in-residence. According to Oliver, the boy had refused to pay attention in class, and was ordered to stay behind each day to make up for the time he had wasted. To alleviate his boredom, the boy doodled in his notebook. Oliver saw creativity in the drawings and encouraged him to continue. It wasn't long before the boy was commissioned to decorate the school's walls. He also stopped acting up in class and became a better student.

"Kids need recognition and new experiences," Oliver says. "Get them in a situation where there is understanding, and changes can take place."

Since the 1950s, many changes have taken place at juvenile detention centers. The cottage-type facilities from Oliver's time have given way to the more institutional-type settings common today. At the same time, the number of offenders, and the severity of their crimes, has increased.

The New Breed

In the past, many of the juveniles in the system were not considered hardened criminals, but simply wayward youngsters who had strayed from the right path. Today, buzzwords such as "super predator" are used increasingly in the press and by politicians to describe the new type of youthful offender - ruthless young men and women who see crime as a rite of passage and who are unconcerned about the consequences of their actions.

Television news splatters images of heinous Crimes perpetrated by youthful offenders; and politicians, eager to look tough on crime, issue promises that they will cure America of this disease by severely cracking down on juvenile delinquency. Although the attacks win political points, not everyone is convinced of their merit. Juvenile justice experts say these attacks can be destructive.

"I thought it was deplorable the way the president and Mr. Dole went on about kids," says John Sheridan, speaking about Bill Clinton's and Bob Dole's tough talk on youth crime during last fall's election campaign. "That kind of talk and fear-mongering will make the situation worse."

Sheridan, a retired administrator of residential services in Concorde, N.H., says the media and politicians need to get their facts straight.

"No question there are more violent crimes today than there were 10 years ago," Sheridan says. But instead of blaming the youth, the media and politicians need to look at the root causes of juvenile delinquency - in particular, the breakdown of the family, child abuse, poverty and the ready availability of guns.

The atmosphere of blame has pressured justice departments in many states to ignore the causes and concentrate mainly on the crimes. As a result, more youths are being tried in criminal courts and sent to adult prisons. This is a departure from the way juveniles were handled in the past.

The Early Years

According to Joanne Perkins, deputy director of the Juvenile Division of the Illinois Department of Corrections, the youths sent to institutions 40 years ago were mostly incorrigibles - runaways, prostitutes and children who could not be controlled by their parents. The facilities were low security and generally run by parents - a husband and wife who lived with and supervised

children in the facility.

John Platt, an administrator of juvenile community services in Illinois, says the cottage environment of the older juvenile facilities attempted to make living arrangements seem as close as possible to life at home. The children lived dormitory-style in the cottages and meals were prepared and served by the cottage "mother." Maple Glen School, where Carl Oliver worked, had a setting similar to this.

Oliver says that at his facility in the 1950s, youths were kept busy with a full day at school and extensive recreational activities. A points program was in place to reward the students for positive behavior. The points were used to "buy" activities, such as camping and bicycling trips. Since many of the youths had never experienced these types of activities, the points program was a true incentive for them to do well in school. Oliver says the youngsters under his care were able to expand their horizons at the facility by participating in the program.

Along with the idea of positive reinforcement came a reluctance to administer severe punishment. In fact, any form of punishment was seen as a last resort. If a child got out of control, he would be locked in a cottage. Oliver says he insisted that children not be hit.

"Once you begin to escalate action, the whole thing gets worse and worse," Oliver says. "You must have an honest and fair approach to discipline."

He says many of the children who came to Maple Glen had social problems - they didn't receive enough attention from their parents or had problems in school. One of the functions of his institution was to instill confidence in the children through recognition of individual talents and abilities.

"Love and empathy must be engendered and worked into the systems" Oliver says.

With added confidence, many children improved their performance at school. In one instance, Oliver asked a boy why his schoolwork had improved so markedly. The boy answered that at the institution, he felt the staff cared about his progress.

To these children, "you're either a friend or a fraud," Oliver says.

Counseling Component

In the 1970s, status offenders no longer came under the jurisdiction of corrections, so adjustments had to be made in staffing and security requirements to deal with these changes. Staff became better trained and more in tune with the needs of the juveniles under their care. New correctional programs also were introduced to treat the youths. These changes, along with changes in state labor laws governing correctional workers, led to the demise of the Ma-and-Pa cottages.

New programs focused on treating the child as a whole person. Years ago, schooling was the main thrust of juvenile detention. Under programs introduced in the 1970s, education was still important, but it was not the only component of treatment. Emphasis was placed on therapy and counseling. Perkins says part of the rehabilitation program involved instilling into the juveniles values and ethics, as well as working on decision-making skills to teach right from wrong.

One program that was in use was called Guided Group Interaction. Juveniles were placed in small groups for counseling, schooling and other activities. Advocates thought this type of environment would allow guidance to take place through the groups.

According to Perkins, the best programs involved all the staff - teachers, doctors and counselors - working together to "deal with the whole kid." That meant not just looking at the youth's criminal activity, but at his or her strengths, talents, background and weaknesses as well.

As facilities received more youths who committed "adult" crimes, the public became concerned that juvenile correctional facilities in their communities posed a potential danger to their neighborhoods.

"The public did not want a kid who committed a crime to be able to walk into their homes," Perkins says.

To address public concern, the institutions were made more secure. Facilities were fenced, more security personnel were added and individual rooms were secured. Security also was a concern inside the facilities, and an improved ratio of staff to juveniles created a safer environment.

Unprecedented Growth

The 1980s saw growth in adult corrections. This, combined with decreases in budgets for youth corrections, led to cutbacks in programs for juveniles. Facilities incorporated the best of the old programs into newer, more cost-effective ones.

Special education programs were developed. By focusing on each youngster individually, correctional workers were able to create programs that best used the skills of each child. Special education workers also were hired to facilitate these new programs.

As the decade wore on, more youths were admitted to facilities, leading to crowding problems. In many cases, the number of staff stayed constant, while the number of juveniles increased. Crowding problems were a potential challenge to the ability of programs to run successfully. Many of the programs worked best in settings of between 25 and 50 people. Changes were made so that juveniles would still receive the appropriate counseling and education.

In Illinois, staff hours were changed so that activities could go on all day, Perkins recalled. Even school hours were extended to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to attend class.

Today's Challenges

Adaptations and new programs continue to be developed today. In particular, military-style boot camps have been introduced in recent years to drill discipline and coax self-worth into juveniles. Treatment programs that address the individuals' deficiencies, along with educational programs, go hand-in-hand with the military exercises.

While many in the juvenile justice field were at first opposed to boot camps, some are starting to see their benefits. Perkins says she had initial reservations about their value because she did not think it was beneficial to run youths down in order to raise them back up. But after visiting a few camps, she was satisfied that boot camps that promote growth without first stripping juveniles of their spirit can have a positive impact on young people's behavior. Many states are now looking to boot camps to alleviate some of the pressures on juvenile correctional facilities.

However, even with the alternatives to traditional juvenile institutions, crowding continues to be a problem. According to a fact sheet prepared by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ), juvenile arrests between 1988 and 1992 increased by 11 percent. This increase put further pressure on the juvenile correctional system. Another troubling number is the increase in murder arrests - up 51 percent for juveniles. Here, the numbers meet the media hype.

Although the number of violent juveniles arrested in a given year is still quite small - NCJJ estimates put the figures at less than one-half of 1 percent of youth - the perception of the dangerous youth remains. This accounts for the pressure to punish juveniles for their crimes by waiving them to criminal courts.

Mary Ann Saar, who has worked in both adult and juvenile facilities in Maine, says the term "punishment" was rarely used in the past to refer to juveniles, but many states now have the term in their juvenile codes. "People have been looking for a silver-bullet answer to juvenile crime," Saar says. "The focus is more on locking them up than on treatment."

Saar, like John Sheridan, says the root causes of delinquency must be explored as a way to decrease the problem. "Kids grow up without parental models," Saar says. "How can we expect them to behave in a manner they have never been taught?"

Many experts in juvenile justice stress the need to work with families and communities to diffuse problems before they get out of hand. "Before we put all this money into jails, we must look at education and strengthening the family," says Mel Brown, executive director of the Montgomery County Community Supervision and Corrections Division in Texas.

According to Brown, just getting tough and locking juveniles up for long periods will not solve the problem. "When values are

not being taught, when you have low self-concepts, you are going to get attention one way or another," Brown says.

And attention - from the press, politicians and the public - is what juvenile delinquents are getting. Many see "The Get Tough Approach" as the way to deal with young offenders. They want more jails built and tougher sentences enforced.

But many of those who work with juvenile delinquents want more emphasis put on treatment programs so that the interned youth have an opportunity to be rehabilitated. "If we send kids back out angrier than when they came in, then we have missed what we should have done," says Joanne Perkins.

During the past 40 years, correctional facilities have changed in structure, security and programming, both in response to juveniles and the environment of the time. Those who work in the industry do what they can to help those in their care, but realize that outside factors must be addressed to reduce delinquency.

Carl Oliver recounts the tale of a boy who so badly wanted to return to the facility after he was released that he stole a bike and rode back. These stories recounted tenfold over the years beg the question: Do juvenile facilities protect society from the youths under their care, or do they protect delinquent youths from society? Perhaps a bit of both, juvenile experts agree.

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