



Report

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YOUTH IN CRISIS: **Children in the Criminal Justice System**



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by Carol A. Lloyd

Depending on perspective, Hamilton County is either a leader in juvenile corrections or itself an incorrigible offender.

Hamilton County Juvenile Court Judge David E. Grossmann would argue for the first interpretation. "Cincinnati does pretty well compared to the major metropolitan areas in the country," he says. A member and president-elect of the National Council of Federal Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Judge Grossmann has a national perspective. He notes that Ohio ranks third in the US in the number of juveniles available for potential court involvement. (New York, Florida and Illinois have differing ages of majority.)

As one approach to dealing with rising juvenile crime, he points to Hamilton County's new, state-of-the-art juvenile detention center that by July will house up to 160 youth offenders.

"We also have one of the finest correctional schools of its kind in the country at Hillcrest and a series of private providers. If we had the funds that we now move to the state and could use it for corrections, well..."

Judge Grossmann notes the sophistication of Hamilton County. "People here know about what kinds of things work," he says. "They're not hampered by a lack of knowledge or by a lack of people willing to step up and help out."

Eileen Cooper Reed, director of Children's Defense Fund Cincinnati, has a different perspective. "We still incarcerate more young people than many places," she says. "We need to stop fooling ourselves that children are a priority here."

"I don't put all that on the juvenile justice system. That's just a remedial program. We don't do the front-end things that prevent kids from getting in

trouble, and in addition, once they get in the justice system, there are too many kids who are unlikely to ever get out."

Citing the cries for law and order and get-tough policies, she says that "the real problem is when people label prevention programs 'pork.' How can preventing children from getting into trouble be called 'pork'?"

She proposes developing an inclusive definition that defines a prevention program as "any kind of activity in which a child is cared for in a supervised setting — the nurturing and care of children from prenatal to the time they're 18."

"It's just common sense — and certainly obvious to anyone in child development — that providing a continuum of care for children has to be the way to go."

Yet Cooper Reed acknowledges that prevention has a built-in problem — little money, and, she explains, lack

of longitudinal research that demonstrates effectiveness.

Each Adult's Responsibility

Making children a true priority, Cooper Reed asserts, "starts with each adult in the community deciding what they need to do outside their home to make sure each child is cared for." The oft-used proverb about taking a village to raise a child, she says, means that everyone is responsible for raising every child. "It doesn't mean everyone has to work with children directly. It may mean donating money or some other kind of contribution."

Attorney Jim Keys exercises his responsibility by making himself available to schools and churches and other youth forums, including shadowing programs. "I agree that the problem is overwhelming. But notwithstanding that, each of us has to do what little we can to be a positive example and positive role model in the hope you can just reach one child. Most of us were impacted by one individual somewhere along the way."

Maybe this "each one reach one" approach can begin to turn the tide, Keys suggests. He notes that community groups such as the Black Male Coalition are working to exert a positive influence of that nature in a diversion program through the juvenile court.

"Young black males are at a disadvantage and the gap seems to be growing. I tell them, 'Yes, it's rough. Sometimes it's unfair. But you have it within you to overcome all that. Don't use race as an excuse. Accept the challenge and show everybody you can succeed.'"

Coordinating Responses Across the Community

In addition to individual efforts, Cooper Reed says the problem must be met by a coordinated, broad-based coalition. Such approaches might include a re-establishment of the Mayor's Commission on Children, or a city-wide effort such as that proposed by Hamilton County Common Pleas Judge Ann Marie Tracy. (See sidebar.)

The Children's Project has discussed convening a summit on children. "But not just a convention," Cooper Reed points out. "This would include youth and neighborhood people, and would come up with action

Making a Difference One-to-One

"Mentoring means growing together" proclaims the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative. Since its inception in 1990, the one-to-one mentoring program has matched caring adults with students from Cincinnati Public Schools. Mentors serve as role models, friends and support people for elementary and secondary students in need of extra attention and encouragement. In 1994, 1,200 active mentoring relationships were maintained at 43 of the district's 81 schools.

The main requirement to be a mentor is to care, according to Miriam West, the project's director. Mentors must attend an orientation training session and are asked to maintain some type of once-a-week contact with students.

For those who are interested, CYC offers seminars on such topics as cultural diversity, goal setting, and planning for summer activities. By providing positive role models for students, mentors supply the kind of attention and encouragement that help boost academic performance, decision making and self-esteem.

CBA President Jack Sherman Jr. has watched his "mentee" Ceran Lipscomb grow from a seventh grader at Porter Junior High to a successful 11th grader at Taft.

"It's been a friendship for both of us," Judge Sherman says. "Ceran's introduced me to a world of sports. I go to his football and basketball games and ask him all kinds of questions about sports. He always knows the answer."

In turn, Judge Sherman has introduced Ceran to people he might not otherwise have met and gone to places he wouldn't otherwise go.

"Our friendship has been something really stable for both of us. I want to see him into college — I'm pushing him now to talk to his counselor and get everything in order," says Sherman.

Despite the large number of adults who have volunteered to be mentors, nearly 700 students are waiting to be matched with a caring adult. It's a program well worth investing some time and energy in, says Sherman.

"Unquestionably, this program can make a difference. It gives kids one person whom they can talk to and rely on. And it's very rewarding for adults. I can't say enough good about the mentoring program."

For more information about the CYC mentoring program, call 369-4959.

steps that people would commit to, all so we can make children a priority here."

Attention to children with problems is critical to Frank Cullen, a professor in the University of Cincinnati's department of criminal justice. "The criminological literature shows, almost beyond dispute, that virtually all juveniles and adults who grow up to be involved in crime start having problems early in life," he says. "If we don't do early intervention with these children, we're going to deal with many of them after the fact. We need to

intervene earlier and smarter.

"Most people in the criminal justice system had dysfunctional parenting," Cullen says. "They developed the wrong values, they learned to think in wrong ways, they hung around with the wrong companions. They were not taught to anticipate consequences. Unless we help them learn the social and economic skills to survive, we're not going to change their behavior. We'll end up locking them up for life at age 25, spending a million dollars on each one."

RECLAIM Ohio: Greater Community Focus

RECLAIM Ohio, Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors, is a legislature-mandated effort to insist upon such community coordination in juvenile correction services. Advocated by Governor Voinovitch and Director of the Department of Youth Services Gino Natalucci-Perischetti, RECLAIM requires each county to pay \$76 per day per youth committed to a Department of Youth Services facility. Hamilton County receives 7.8 million for its yearly allocation. Committing last year's total number of youths to state facilities — 390 — would, for example, exceed the county's allocation.

Hence, RECLAIM means Hamilton County must reduce the number of youths it commits to DYS facilities, instead finding — and developing — appropriate community placements.

Basically, according to Judge Grossman, the program is attempting a trade-off. "You're looking at an eventual move to local control over the juvenile corrections system."

Grossman explains that Ohio already has strong local controls in its juvenile courts. "We run our own detention and probation units. In many states," he says, "institutions are controlled by the executive branch, which is much less efficient. I can hold my agency accountable," he says, adding that clearly means he is accountable as well.

Alternatives to Incarceration

The RECLAIM program delights Bob Mecum, executive director of Lighthouse Youth Services. Formerly known as New Life Youth Services, the agency offers a continuum of outreach and treatment services for troubled youth.

"What do we want our juvenile corrections system to accomplish?" Mecum asks. "Is it really in our national interests to have created a system in which more African-American college-age males are involved in the correctional system than enrolled in college?"

Mecum asserts that if we really want a criminal justice system that will end juvenile delinquency careers, alternatives to public correctional facilities are the answer. Further, he maintains, these alternative approaches

Training for Success

"If you discipline yourself, no one else has to do it," says Eugene Fields to his five Saturday morning classes. The 160 or so children, 4-14, who rotate through his Bushido martial-arts training at Withrow High School, are part of Cincinnati Public School's Project Success, a multi-faceted approach to helping students learn to make wise choices and prevent violence.

"I try to show them that self-discipline is the basis for success," says Fields who learned judo during his army days in Japan and, in 1964, placed fourth in the Olympics trials.

Fields and his wife Jewell dispense training and wisdom at their Avondale center, too. They also consult with human service and law enforcement agencies on crisis management.

"People think martial arts is all about fighting, but it's not. It's about being in control of yourself. Judo lets these children get rid of frustration and have fun doing it. They become confident enough to know they can take care of themselves, and wise enough to know violence never solves anything."

He says the bushido fits in perfectly with Project Success's stress on math, science, reading, and a structured violence prevention curriculum. Students learn to count in Japanese and use Japanese words for various moves. "Sometimes we say to a child, 'How is it that you know how to say these words, but you don't remember your multiplication tables?'"

One session began with students engaged in typical 14-year-old behavior, but quickly switched to the students following directions and listening to the instructor. At the conclusion of the workout, each student got a hug and words of encouragement from each of the four instructors. Students responded with bright smiles, especially several young males who had worked hard at appearing tough throughout the session. The simple gesture of affirmation for the students — and their delighted responses — were moving.

And what could community members do to help Mr. Fields' peace-keeping efforts?

"Well, if only we could arrange for yellow bus service from some of the outlying schools to our bushido school. . . . Or some of your readers could help out with these uniforms," he says, pointing to his white judo outfit. "To kids, these are magic. Not many families can afford the \$30 to buy one. But what a difference it makes to a child. And mats —"

For more information, contact Eugene Fields at Bushido, Inc., 221-4900.

are both more effective and less expensive than traditional public correctional facilities.

Lighthouse runs The Paint Creek facility in Bainbridge, Ohio, a residential program for serious juvenile offenders. This first-ever privately run juvenile corrections program for serious juvenile offenders has racked up significantly lower recidivism rates than the generally agreed-upon 50-55 percent average in most state corrections facilities.

The philosophy at Paint Creek and the 11 other programs of Lighthouse earns high praise from community experts such as Debra Rothstein, senior attorney for Legal Aid of Cincinnati.

"Lighthouse gives kids in crisis a clear message about boundaries and limits. They have expectations, but the staff is able to teach by role modeling, not by being judgmental. They're inclusive rather than alienating," she says.

"These are kids who are told their parents are no good, they themselves are causing problems in class, so they're excluded from school. How do they choose something other than violence?"

"Look," she continues, "my husband died two years ago. I, who had all kinds of coping skills, went into a dark hole. How much worse for kids who have never had anyone on their side — how can we expect them to cope?"

At Lighthouse programs, young people in crisis are offered a structured, supportive environment in which everyone — staff and kids — knows the limits. "They know they're not going to get hurt, and they're not going to hurt anyone else because we won't allow it,"

The Children's Project

"It's my pet project," says the Hon. Ann Marie Tracey about The Children's Project, an effort to coordinate a broad-based coalition focusing on making the needs of children a priority. "We've gathered a handful of people who are concerned about children and we're trying to brainstorm about the ways we can fill in the service gaps."

Explaining that it grew out of her conversations with Sr. Jean Patrice Harrington, Judge Tracey says the informal group thus far includes Sr. Harrington; Theresa Henderson, director of Cincinnati's Council of Innovative Schools and former principal of Hoffman Elementary; the Hon. Deidre Hair, Hamilton County Municipal Court; attorney Beth Wayne; Theresa Grundy, United Way; Eileen Cooper Reid, director of the Cincinnati branch of the Children's Defense Fund; and retired businessman Snowden Rowe.

"The need is so great that it's hard to focus," says Tracey. "But that's sort of what the problem has been all along — everyone focusing on their own narrow area. We want to take a broader view."

Preliminary plans call for a city-wide conference on the needs of children and youth. The group is in its beginning stages and welcomes input. For more information, call Judge Tracey at 632-8839.

says Mecum. "The bottom line, really, is that they learn very quickly that it's safe and they can express themselves and not be hurt."

Paint Creek residents correspond in a journal daily with a special staff person assigned to them. This one-to-one approach gives them opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and be encouraged at every point.

Mecum attributes the program's success to recognizing the power of peer culture — with the notion that "anything adults can do will have only limited impact" — and building an environment in which individuals are responsible for their own as well as others' behaviors. This approach shifts

control to the group and demands it from the individual, he explains.

Regardless of the approach used in treatment, Mecum says the difference between effective and ineffective treatment is aftercare, the existence of some support in the person's environment. "If there's no help for the youngster when he returns to school and the community, he's not likely to maintain the changes he's made. We need to mobilize community services to wrap around the young person."