

Up to Speed

A Review of Research for Practitioners

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Juvenile Probation on the Eve of the Next Millennium

BY RONALD P. CORBETT, JR.

JUDGE JUDITH Sheindlin, supervising judge for the Manhattan Family Court, published in 1996 her perspective on the state of affairs in juvenile justice, titled *Don't Pee on My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining*. Judge Sheindlin's views, graphically implied in the title, include a repudiation of the social causation approach to juvenile delinquency and a call for a return to an ethic of self-discipline and individual accountability. From the vantage point of over twenty years experience as a juvenile judge, Sheindlin sees a system that can "barely function" (p.5), trading in empty threats and broken promises. Juvenile courts in her view have avoided assigning blame for wrongdoing and have thereby encouraged a lack of individual responsibility, leaving young offenders with ready excuses for their predatory behavior and completely without fear of any consequences. The system must "cut through the baloney and tell the truth," starting with the "total elimination of probation" (p.61) in favor of a greater reliance on police surveillance and increased incarceration.

While more extreme than most, Sheindlin's damning critique of the juvenile justice system is of a piece with a number of recent treatments of the system, both journalistic and academic. A brief synopsis of each suggests a system in a severe state of crisis:

- In *No Matter How Loud I Shout*, Edward Humes (1996), a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, presents an inside view of the workings of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court. Describing the system generally as "broken, battered and outgunned" (p.371), Humes echoes Sheindlin's theme of a widespread sense of immunity among juvenile offenders, perpetuated by a system that dispenses wrist slaps and apple bites in lieu of real sanctions. Facing continuous delays instead of prompt justice, and infrequent phone contact from probation officers instead of the close supervision needed, the young offenders in Los

Angeles quickly learn that they are beyond the reach of the law:

That's how the system programs you. They let you go and they know that just encourages you, and then they can get you on something worse later on. It's like, they set you up. Of course, I'm to blame, too, for going along with it. I didn't have to do those things, I know that. But the system didn't have to make it so goddamn easy (Humes, 1996, p.333).

- In *The State of Violent Crime in America*, the first report of the newly formed Council on Crime in America (1996), the juvenile system is portrayed as a revolving door where again the theme of the lack of consequences and the consequent emboldening of young offenders is struck. Chaired by former Attorney General Griffin Bell and well-known conservative intellectual William Bennett, the report illustrates the success of one jurisdiction (Jacksonville, Florida) with the increased use of adult punishments for serious juvenile offenders and generally calls for a sober realization that the juvenile justice system's traditional reliance on treatment interventions must give way to strategies based on incapacitation and punishment.
- Finally, in *Screwing the System and Making It Work*, an ethnographic study of an unnamed juvenile court system, sociologist Mark Jacobs (1990) depicts a system whose principle intervention—community supervision—is demonstrably failing and whose state of disorganization and administrative weakness undermines any attempt at effective solutions. The few successes that Jacobs finds are accomplished in spite of the system by creatively evading the rules and regulations which otherwise frustrate all reasonable efforts. In the end, Jacobs concludes that the juvenile justice system fails because it attempts to solve problems of social breakdown through the largely ineffectual means of individual treatment plans.

Even granting that exposes will always earn publication more quickly than positive coverage, these four notable publications have such convergent findings that a conclusion regarding a crisis state for juvenile justice generally and juvenile probation specifically, seems inescapable. What then should be done? What initiatives might be undertaken in probation that would set juvenile justice on a more promising course, earning it back a measure of public trust and genuine impact on the lives of young offenders? This article will attempt an answer to those questions by first

*This article was originally published in *Juvenile Delinquency in the United States and The United Kingdom*, edited by Gary L. McDowell and Jinney S. Smith. Reprinted with permission of St. Martin's Press, Incorporated.

reviewing the scope of the work of juvenile probation and current trends in juvenile crime, then reviewing what has been learned about successful correctional interventions and how those lessons can be applied to juvenile probation, concluding with an examination of a new model for juvenile justice that can incorporate the findings of research in a context that values the rights and expectations of offenders, victims and society.

Juvenile Probation in the United States

In a review of juvenile probation nationally published in March 1996 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Torbet reports an annual caseload of nearly 1.5 million delinquency cases, resulting in some 500,000 juveniles under probation at any one time. Juvenile probation officers have caseloads averaging 41 offenders, with much higher numbers typifying urban locations.

Duties of juvenile probation officers are multiple but chiefly fall into the following three categories:

- *Intake, Screening and Assessment.*—Juvenile probation officers are charged with the responsibility in many jurisdictions of determining which juveniles under arrest will proceed to a formal court process or instead be diverted to an informal process, if the offense involved is minor. In making this recommendation, the officer will obtain from the offender, his/her family and any social agencies involved with the juvenile at least a threshold amount of current status and background information involving such factors as school attendance, behavior at home and in the community, family relationships, peers, etc. A great deal of emphasis in screening will be placed on the circumstances of the offense and the previous record, if any. In addition to recommending for or against diversion, this intake process will yield pertinent information for the juvenile judge to utilize in making decisions regarding detention, bail, conditions of release, appointment of counsel and other matters.
- *Pre-Sentence Investigations.*—Probation officers play a crucial role in determining the most appropriate sentence or disposition to be imposed on the juvenile before the court. In preparing such reports, probation officers will begin by expanding information gathered at intake as well as reaching out to other officials, treatment personnel, and family that may have useful information or perspectives bearing on the issue of an appropriate disposition. Pre-sentence reports will typically include as major sections a detailed examination of the facts and circumstances surrounding the offense and the juvenile's role in the incident; an elaborate social history, including any professional evaluations undertaken at the request of the court or the family; a summary of the impact of the delinquency on the victim(s) and their views regarding an appropriate disposition; and a discussion of the elements of an ideal disposition, including the alternatives available along with the probation officer's recommendation

(National Center for Juvenile Justice, 1991).

- *Supervision.*—The bulk of the work of juvenile probation officers is consumed in supervising youth placed by the courts on probation. This supervision includes both direct and regular contact with the offender (where resources permit) as well as collateral work with parents, schools, employers, and agency personnel. It is the probation officer's responsibility to enforce the orders of the court in the form of victim restitution or curfews, to oversee the activities of the offender as much as possible, to uncover any lapses in behavior or company, and to insure that the juvenile takes advantage of all opportunities for addressing personal problems such as substance abuse or school failings. While the ideal is to insure full compliance with all the conditions of probation and to see that the juvenile leaves probation better equipped for a law-abiding life than when supervision began, probation officers must also respond quickly to non-compliance and must move for revocation of probation and a more serious sentence when circumstances warrant.

In discharging this core function of supervision, effective probation must play many roles—police officer, counselor, family therapist, educator, mentor, and disciplinarian. It is the successful juggling of these multiple roles, assessing which is most appropriate in a given situation, that leads to the most effective practice.

Recent Trends

Trends within the juvenile probation system are ominous. The number of delinquency petitions increased 23 percent between 1989 and 1993, leading to a 21 percent increase in probation caseloads. At the same time, there has been no concomitant increase in resources provided to the juvenile courts, though the public demand for accountability and hard-nosed, intensive treatment of juveniles before the court has become most pronounced (Torbet, 1996).

More worrisome still is the worsening profile of the juveniles coming before the court. Even though most youth placed on probation are adjudicated for property offenses, the percent placed on probation for violent offenses has increased significantly in the last years. In 1989, 17 percent of those youth on probation were adjudicated for violent offenses; by 1993, that percentage had increased to 21 percent, which translates into nearly a 25 percent growth in the proportion of violent offenders on juvenile probation (Torbet, 1996).

This trend has changed the character of probation work for many juvenile officers, who now must reckon with safety issues of a new dimension. A Justice Department survey found that one-third of officers polled had been assaulted in the line of duty and that 42 percent reported themselves as being either usually or always concerned for their safety (Torbet, 1996).

This problem is amplified by the generally held view that today's juveniles have a degree of unprecedented cold-bloodedness and remorselessness. While these impressions

are difficult to quantify in terms of traditional research, it has been this author's experience that, pervading discussions within both probation and police circles, has been the theme of a growing and alarming lack of concern and emotion among young offenders for both the consequences to their victims or even themselves of their involvement in serious violence. This is the new face of juvenile crime and it is a major departure from past experience, leaving few reliable blueprints for action available to concerned officials. In this connection, James Q. Wilson, a professor of public policy at UCLA, has referred to "youngsters who afterwards show us the blank, unremorseful stare of a feral, presocial being" (as quoted in DiIulio, 1996).

The Coming Plague—Juvenile Violence

In a column appearing in the *New York Times* in the summer of 1996, Princeton criminologist John DiIulio described the juvenile violence problems as "grave and growing" (p. A 15). The following trends underline DiIulio's concern and provide further evidence of an explosion of juvenile violence that has the potential to overwhelm America's big cities.

- The number of juveniles murdered grew by 82 percent between 1984 and 1994;
- While most trends in adult arrests for violent crime are down since 1990, juvenile arrests for serious violence increased 26 percent by 1994, including a 15 percent increase in murder;
- Juvenile arrest rates for weapons violations nearly doubled between 1987 and 1994;
- In 1980, the number of juveniles murdered by firearms was 47 percent of all murdered juveniles. By 1994, that percentage had increased to 67 percent (Snyder, et al., 1996).

Researchers have been able to attribute the greatest part of the increase in juvenile homicides to firearm-related murders. Al Blumsten (1996) has offered an analysis of this increase that traces its origins to the emergence of the crack cocaine trade in the mid 1980's and the acquisition of firearms that was a unique aspect of that emerging criminal enterprise. Young people who obtained guns originally for business purposes would also have them available in the event of other, more conventional types of conflicts among youth. The wider circulation and possession of firearms by the "players" caused other youth not involved in the drug trade to pick up guns for self-protection, as they did not wish to leave themselves at a tactical disadvantage.

Related research confirms that though firearm-related deaths among youth may be commonly seen as related to drug trade, in fact most such homicides are a byproduct of a violent argument rather than an event occurring during the commission of a crime (Pacific Center, 1994). It becomes plain then that strategies to reduce the most serious juvenile crime must address the issue of reducing gun possessions, an issue to be taken up later in this paper.

Two additional observations help frame the future of juvenile violence. It is commonly accepted that rates of juvenile crime, including violence, are driven by a demographic imperative. That is, as the number of people in the crime-prone age bracket—the teens and early twenties—ebbs and flows, so generally does the crime rate (Fox, 1996). The bad news in this respect is that America is entering a 10-15 year span when the crime-prone age cohort will increase substantially. For example, by the year 2000, there will be a million more people between the ages of 14–17 than there were in 1995, of which roughly half will be male (Wilson, 1995a). By the year 2010, there will be 74 million juveniles under age 17 (DiIulio, 1996). These estimates have led DiIulio and others to project that juvenile participation in murder, rape, and robbery will more than double by 2010.

However, the most recent data, while limited, is promising. During 1995, for the first time in ten years, the rate of juvenile homicide decreased for the second year in a row, by 15.2 percent (Butterfield, 1996). In a report issued by the U.S. Department of Justice, data gathered by the FBI revealed that the juvenile homicide rate, which reached an all-time high in 1993, declined over the following two years by 22.8 percent. While a two-year trend is certainly encouraging, it is too soon to predict that the demographical forecast is inoperative. Murders by young people are still alarmingly high and, as the number of teenagers increases over the next several years, it will take hard work and good fortune to sustain the currently hopeful trend.

Lessons Learned About Effective Interventions

While one could hardly guess it from the current tone of relentless punitiveness pervading the debates on criminal justice policy, there has been a near exponential increase over the last 15 years in what is known with some significant confidence about the characteristics of effective correctional interventions. While the amount of public funds devoted to criminal research pales in comparison with that devoted to other forms of basic research (e.g., health issues), researchers have nonetheless made important advances in our understanding of the ingredients necessary to purposefully impact criminal and delinquent careers (Petersilia 1990).

Canadian criminologists Don Andrews and Paul Gendreau have been at the leading edge of this research. By employing the relatively new statistical technique of meta-analysis, which allows for combining the results of multiple studies of a similar type to test the aggregate strength of a given intervention, Andrews and Gendreau (1990) have been able to identify key factors that can be utilized in the construction of correctional programs, factors which when used in combination can reduce recidivism by as much as 50 percent. Their research looked equally at juvenile and adult programs and found commonalities across the two groups.

Effective programs had the following features:

- They were intensive and behavioral. Intensity was meas-

ured by both the absorption of the offenders' daily schedule and the duration of the program over time. Appropriate services in this respect will occupy 40–70 percent of the offenders' time and last an average of six months. Behavioral programs will establish a regimen of positive reinforcements for pro-social behavior and will incorporate a modeling approach including demonstrations of positive behavior that offenders are then encouraged to imitate;

- They target high risk offenders and criminogenic needs. Somewhat surprisingly, effective programs worked best with offenders classified as high-risk. This effect is strengthened if the program first identifies the presence of individual needs known to be predictive of recidivism (e.g. substance abuse, poor self-control) and then focuses on eliminating the problem. Targeting needs not proven to be related to criminal behavior (e.g. self-esteem) will not produce favorable results;
- Treatment modalities and counselors must be matched with individual offender types, a principle Andrews and Gendreau refer to as "responsivity." The program approach must be matched with the learning style and personality of the offender—a one-size-fits-all approach will fail. Taking care to compare the style of any therapist/counselor with the personality of the offender (e.g., anxious offenders should be matched with especially sensitive counselors) also is critical;
- They provide pro-social contexts and activities and emphasize advocacy and brokerage. Effective programs will replace the normal offender networks with new circles of peers and contacts who are involved in law-abiding lifestyles. Success will be enhanced by aggressive efforts to link offenders with community agencies offering needed services. Most offenders will be unfamiliar with strategies for working the community and effective programs can serve as a bridge to facilitate a kind of mainstreaming of offenders (Gendreau, 1996).

Lipsey (1991) undertook a mega-analysis of some 400 juvenile programs and reached findings similar to those of Andrews and Gendreau. Lipsey's findings are impressive due to the much greater number of programs included in the analysis and the fact that he restricted his study to juvenile programs. In addition to those findings that parallel earlier results, Lipsey further discovered that skill-building programs and those that were closely monitored, usually by a research team, for program implementation and integrity, were successful.

Effectiveness of Specific Programs

Traditional Probation

Despite the fact that it is clearly the treatment of choice for most juvenile offenders, there has been amazingly little major research on the effectiveness of regular probation

(Clear and Braga, 1995). Targeted at only a small percentage of the overall probation population, researchers' monies and efforts have more commonly been devoted to more recent innovations such as intensive supervision, electronic monitoring, or boot camps.

One noteworthy exception to this trend is a study published in 1988 by Wooldredge, in which he analyzed the impact of four different types of dispositions—including traditional probation—imposed by Illinois juvenile courts. This study of the subsequent recidivism of over two thousand delinquents found that lengthy probation supervision if combined with community treatment had the greatest effect in suppressing later recidivism, particularly when compared with incarceration or outright dismissal. Wooldredge concludes as follows:

While it appears that "doing something" is [usually] better than "doing nothing" for eliminating recidivism, this study suggests that differences in "something" may also yield differences in recidivism rates. Specifically, two years of court supervision with community treatment is superior to any other sentence examined in this study for eliminating and [delaying] recidivism. On the other hand, sentences involving detention should be carefully considered in relating the types of delinquents they may be effective on (Wooldredge, 1988, pp.281, 293).

Juvenile Intensive Supervision

The concept of intensive probation supervision (IPS) was one of a new generation of strategies to emerge from the intermediate sanctions movement. First developed for adult offenders, IPS programs were intended both to provide an alternative to incarceration for appropriate offenders as well as to enhance the impact of supervision on high-risk probationers.

The concept spread to the juvenile domain quickly and spawned similar experimentation, though not nearly on the same scale as the adult programs. The program models emphasized reduced caseloads and, in contrast to similar efforts in the 1960's, put a premium on closer surveillance and monitoring, with reduced attention to treatment (Armstrong, 1991).

As with so much else in the juvenile correctional field, little reliable scientific evidence is available on program impact. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCC) undertook in the late 80's a review of some 41 programs and found that evaluative data of program sites was "generally nonexistent" (Krisberg, et al. 1989, p. 40). A similar conclusion was reached by Armstrong (1991) who found only five scientifically acceptable program evaluations and further criticized the absence of any apparent theoretical base for the programs.

Though useful research on juvenile IPS programs is scarce, two studies produced at least minimally reliable results. In the New Pride Replication Project conducted between 1980 and 1984, ten newly established juvenile IPS programs were located in both medium and large cities. The program was comprised of two six-month phases, the first involving nearly daily contact which gradually decreased during the second phase. The programs supplemented this

intensive supervision with heavy doses of alternative schooling, vocational training, and job placement.

After gathering three years of outcome data, findings revealed no significant differences between the experiment and control groups (Palmer, 1992). A similar study by Barton and Butts (1990) on three juvenile IPS programs using random assignment found comparable results, though it was asserted that the IPS cost less than one third the expense of incarceration.

More recently, an experiment was undertaken by the Toledo Juvenile Court in using IPS as a diversion from commitment to the state youth authority. Employing a mix of surveillance and treatment techniques, the program extended over six months and the research employed an 18-month follow-up period. Results found that there was no difference in subsequent recidivism between the IPS youth and a matched group committed to the Ohio Department of Youth Services. Researchers concluded that the IPS program posed no greater threat to public safety, at approximately 20 percent of the cost of incarcerating the same youth (Weibush, 1993).

Violent Offenders

In light of the prospect of a growing number of violent juveniles, information specific to intervening with this particular offender is especially critical. Recent research includes one major evaluation of intensive supervision for violent juveniles, though it must be said that this program followed commitment to a small, secure juvenile facility with subsequent stays in community programs for several months. Consequently, it would be difficult to compare the population and prior experience to that of most juvenile probationers. The supervision focused on job placement, education, and to some lesser extent, family counseling and peer support.

In a two-year follow-up measuring for subsequent felony or violent arrests, no significant differences were found between program youth and a control group who were institutionalized for eight months and then placed on standard juvenile parole. Some evidence was found that sites which had stronger and/or consistently implemented treatment components produced better results (Palmer, 1992).

Juvenile Boot Camp

Boot camps have become a popular option on the continuum of sanctions for adult offenders so—as with IPS programs—it is not surprising that juvenile agencies have implemented their own versions. Such programs emphasize strong discipline, modeled on military programs, and a strict physical conditioning regimen. The typical program is aimed at non-violent offenders, and involves a 3-month commitment followed by after-care (Peterson, 1996).

In 1992, the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funded three new juvenile boot camps and undertook impact evaluations. The subsequent reports included the following findings:

- Most participants completed the program.
- Academic skills were significantly improved.
- A significant number of participants found jobs during aftercare.
- No reduction in recidivism was found compared to a control group of youth who were institutionalized or placed on probation (Peterson, 1996).

How Intensive is Intensive?

All of the programs reviewed above represent the characteristic efforts at recent reform in juvenile corrections and are alike in their emphasis on increased oversight of offenders, coupled in some instances (the more effective experiments) with increased rehabilitative services. They are also alike in having largely failed by the most important measure—recidivism.

Why has there been so little success? Ted Palmer, arguably the dean of research in juvenile corrections, argues that the “intensive” programs have not been intensive enough, in light of the multiple needs presented by high risk offenders:

...given the interrelatedness of most serious, multiple offenders' difficulties and deficits, it is perhaps overly optimistic to expect fairly short-term programs to help most such individuals sort out and settle these matters once and for all, even if the programs are intensive (Palmer, 1992, p.112).

It may be that the system has been attempting to generate success on the cheap. To create expectations of turning very troubled youth from confirmed pathways of negative and predatory behavior—patterns developed over perhaps a decade of poor if not harmful rearing—through the application of concentrated service for a 6-12 month period, may be entirely unrealistic. To do the impossible, we have generally spent less than one-third the cost of institutionalizing these same youth.

Rather than congratulate ourselves for the short-term cost savings represented by diversion from incarceration to an intermediate sanction, we should think of making a substantial investment in the near term—something, let us say, more equivalent to the cost of a year's incarceration—in order to increase the chances of long-term significant savings represented by future imprisonments avoided. Americans, it has been often observed, are congenitally drawn to short-term strategies and addicted to quick returns on their investment. What has been found not to work in other domains (business, personal investment, etc.) may similarly prove self-defeating in juvenile justice.

Juvenile Transfer to Adult Court

One clear result of the growing violence committed by youth is an increased reliance on the “transfer” option—that is, the power of the system to move jurisdiction over juvenile offenders into adult court, to take advantage of the

greater penalties available on the adult level. The popularity of the transfer option is reflected in both an increased number of cases where jurisdiction is waived (a 41 percent increase from 1989-1993) as well as legislative reforms aimed at making waivers more automated than discretionary (Howell, et al., 1996).

Studies conducted on the comparative effectiveness of handling similar offenders in adult versus juvenile court give the advantage to juvenile court where recidivism is the measure. Most studies indicate that juveniles imprisoned in adult facilities were more likely to be arrested following release.

In the making of criminal or juvenile justice policy, frequently political and ideological considerations will override (if not totally ignore) the available empirical data. The move to transfer a greater number of juvenile offenders to adult court is not likely to abate; it is a specific reform that has become captive of the "get tough" philosophy that unquestionably holds sway in the current climate.

Five Steps Toward a Reformed Juvenile Probation

Let Research Drive Policy

Despite an ever-growing body of research relevant to the formation of criminal justice policy, it remains remarkable how little empirical findings inform the design of programs in juvenile justice. As a result of this rather willful ignorance, the juvenile probation field can be found to embrace existing models for intervention (e.g. juvenile IPS) with scant if any evidence that such models work (Blumstein and Petersilia, 1995).

The field too often becomes enthralled by the latest fad and rushes to adopt it, irrespective of the evidence that it has or can work. Finkenauer (1982) has referred to this as the "panacea phenomenon" and it seems no less common 15 years after he first identified this tendency.

This myopia on the part of correctional administrators has multiple explanations. Practitioners typically value the wisdom imparted by experience more than that contained in criminological journals. They prefer to consult their own intuition and gut instincts, more than any hard data. Secondly, the pertinent research is not as accessible as it might be. This is a product of the conventions of the academy, which rewards publication in criminological journals more so than writing done for the publications practitioners would read or consult. Thirdly, administrators and policy makers live and work in a politically charged atmosphere where consideration of "what works" is only one of the relevant considerations in developing policy. In the administrator's world, that which is congruent with the current political climate may indeed depart from what makes sense empirically.

Even allowing for the burden to survive the ideological wars, juvenile probation administrators could do a much better job of incorporating a research perspective into their decision making. This research-sensitive approach would

take two forms: first, managers must realize that policy rarely needs to be created in a vacuum; that is, in setting policy in any particular direction, there will usually be some data bearing on the decision to be made. Becoming familiar with the techniques for adequately researching the literature and accessing the federal information services is crucial, which implies the staffing of at least a modest research division.

Secondly, all new initiatives should include a strong evaluation component. We have missed opportunities to learn from much previous experimentation because data was not kept in a way that facilitated any useful analysis (Palmer, 1992). All new programs should be seen as experiments, with clearly demonstrated time lines and methodologies for assessing impact. Juvenile probation agencies must become "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990) in which no course of action becomes institutionalized until its value is proven and feedback loops become a regular feature of the informational architecture of an agency.

Instead of viewing decisions about future programs as primarily a choice between hard or soft, tough or lenient, probation administrators should train themselves to think more in terms of smart versus dumb. "Smart" programs are those built on existing research with strong evaluation components. While not all programs sponsored by juvenile probation must meet this test absolutely (restitution programs are vital, irrespective of their impact on recidivism), juvenile probation will gain in credibility and impact as it gets "smarter."

Emphasize Early Intervention

If juvenile probation were analogized to an investment strategy, the enterprise would be facing bankruptcy. In many respects, resources are allocated to that area (older, chronic offenders) where they are least likely to gain an impressive return. First offenders, by contrast, are all but ignored. Demonstrated incapacity for reform—not amenability to change—is what earns attention from the system. That must change.

Much has been learned in the past 20 years about the early precursors for chronic delinquency (Greenwood, 1995). We have learned, for example, that children whose parents are cold, cruel and inconsistent in their parenting skills are at greatly increased risk for becoming enmeshed in the juvenile justice system.

So what? Is there anything that can be done about it? Yes! Models have been developed that work dramatically in training parents to more effectively supervise their own children themselves, reducing significantly their later delinquencies. In a report released in the spring of 1996, Rand Corporation researchers identified this form of parent training as being among the two or three most cost-effective strategies in terms of reduction in crime and delinquency (Greenwood, et al., 1996). An elaborate and highly tested model for this training, developed by the Oregon Social Learning Center, has been supported by repeated evaluations (Wilson, 1995b).

One collateral finding from this research—in fact from nearly all research on prevention—is that intervening earlier (in or before the primary grades) yields stronger results. Most delinquents enter the juvenile court in their early teens. Can they be reached earlier?

Quite apart from what schools and other communities can do with younger children, juvenile courts have access to young children encountered either as the subject of abuse and neglect petitions or as younger siblings of older delinquents. By reconceptualizing their mandate as intervening with families instead of solely with the convicted juvenile, courts can truly enter the prevention business in a viable way. The Rand report strongly suggests that a small amount spent on young children and their families earlier can save much more substantial costs later.

Intervening aggressively with abusive families would very likely repay itself many times over. Juveniles found guilty of the more serious crimes typically have long histories of abuse. A National Institute of Justice study found that an abused or neglected child has a 40 percent greater chance of becoming delinquent than other children (DiIulio, 1996).

Assessment instruments are now available to determine the ongoing risk for abuse within families as well as to predict the likelihood that patterns of abuse will change once an intervention has commenced (Gelles, 1996). Focusing attention on abusive families will pay off both in terms of child protection and delinquency prevention.

The Los Angeles Juvenile Court has undertaken a special project with first offenders who have the hallmarks of chronic delinquents. Instead of waiting for several arrests before intensive services are provided, the notion now will be that a greater investment earlier on targeted youth makes more sense (Humes, 1996). This preventive approach promises to work better and cost less.

Emphasize the Paying of Just Debts

The public image of the Juvenile Court has been marred for decades now by the impression that it coddles vicious children and “treats” kids who are more deserving of punishment.

Probation administrators ignore this perception at their peril, as it undermines their credibility and diminishes their support. Both as a matter of justice and good correctional practice, juveniles should get their “just deserts” for harm done. Restitution and community service programs repay and restore victims and harmed communities and counter the prevalent notion that juvenile offenders are immune from any real penalties, an impression certainly re-enforced by Humes’ (1996) recent study of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court.

In his otherwise bleak and discouraging account, Humes relates the story of a program that places juvenile probationers in a school for disabled children where the probationers must discharge their community service responsibilities by caring for and feeding young children with major disabilities.

A juvenile prosecutor describes the impact of the program as follows:

These are street thugs, serious offenders, some of the worst kids who come through here. Most of them have served time in camp or at the Youth Authority, and they’re harder than ever. Then they end up feeding and bathing autistic and wheelchair-bound kids, working with them intensively, having these handicapped folks depending on them utterly. It works a kind of magic. It softens them. For the first time in their lives, someone is dependent on them. And it changes them. It’s been going for four years, there’s never been a problem, never anyone neglected or hurt. Rival gang members go there and work together side by side. Sometimes it seems like a miracle (p.173).

One of the most promising new paradigms in juvenile justice is the “Balanced and Restorative Justice Mode” developed by Gordon Bazemore of Florida Atlantic University and his colleagues. In a compelling design that attempts to simultaneously serve the just expectations of victim, community, and offender alike, the following principle is enunciated: “When an offense occurs by the offender, an obligation incurs by the offender to the victim that must be fulfilled” (Maloney et al., 1995, p. 43).

All juvenile probationers—in the interests of justice, for the sake of any injured victims or communities, and, not insignificantly, for their own moral education—must be compelled to pay their just debts. In doing so, wounds heal, losses are restored, and the moral sentiments of the community are assuaged.

Make Probation Character Building

In the parlance of traditional clinical assessments, most delinquents have been labeled as “character disordered.” To many observers, this was a kind of “default” diagnosis that filled in the blank when no other form of mental illness seemed present.

Indeed, delinquents do seem lacking in what we refer to commonly as character, by which we generally mean habits of thought and action that reveal a fidelity to principles of integrity, good comportment, concern for others, and self-control (Wilson, 1995b).

Neo-conservative perspectives on crime have brought the issue of character defects among delinquents and criminals to the foreground, in contrast to the medical model which attributed various “problems” and “illnesses” to offenders, deficiencies presumably beyond their control and therefore beyond their responsibility (Wilson, 1995a). Imputing bad character to delinquents would seem to imply greater responsibility for wrong-doing while also pointing to a different type of remediation.

Can a term of juvenile probation build character? As Wilson (1995b) suggests, we know little about how to inculcate character. Yet we have some clues. According to Aristotle, character is reflected not in some inner quality or virtue, but in a pattern of commendable actions which, in the doing, both build and reveal character.

In the Aristotelian sense then, juvenile courts can attempt to build character by compelling probationers to complete actions that youth of high character would undertake. Compensating for harm done, discussed above, is surely part of this. Regular attendance and good behavior at school would also reflect character in action. Obeying the reason-

able requests of parents and respectable conduct at home and in the neighborhood would further exemplify character. If Aristotle was right that we become good by doing good, requiring juvenile probationers to do good even though they may not seem or yet be good could, over time, build what we call character.

As Andrews and Kiessling (1980) found, effective probation officers model pro-social behavior. Juvenile probation officers must then see themselves as moral educators, who must constantly look for opportunities to exemplify good character to those they supervise. Every occasion where self-restraint is exercised in the face of a probationer's provocation, where kindness and courtesy is extended to a probationer's family in defiance of the juvenile's expectation, and every effort by the officer to insure fair treatment in dispositional and revocational proceedings are opportunities for character building and moral education.

If character is revealed in making moral decisions, then juvenile probation agencies could undertake more explicit strategies for moral development. Though employed more in educational than correctional settings, techniques for instilling a heightened moral sense have been used successfully in advancing the moral reasoning powers of young children (Lickona, 1992). Based on Lawrence Kohlberg's highly regarded theory of moral development, participants in the program are led through discussions of moral dilemmas where they must reconcile competing interests and reach just solutions. Research has shown that subjects can elevate their moral reasoning away from more selfish ego-centric perspectives to broader more altruistic and empathetic thinking.

This psychoeducational strategy would lend itself readily to the probation environment. In lieu of what is too often a rather mechanical and vacuous exchange with a probation officer once or twice each month, young offenders could participate in discussion groups led by trained probation officers with both offenders and staff likely feeling that they are engaged in a more productive experience.

Prioritize Violence Prevention

In light of the growing rates of serious juvenile violence and with this trend expected to continue into the next decade (Fox, 1996), juvenile probation must focus on efforts it can undertake to suppress violent behavior.

As mentioned earlier, there is scant evidence that the more punitive strategies will have long-term impact. (It must be said that there are independent "just deserts" rationales for punishing seriously violent offenders, but this does not account for first offenders showing aggressive tendencies.) Again drawing from efforts more commonly found in schools, some juvenile probation departments have undertaken violence prevention programs with juvenile probationers (Office of the Commissioner of Probation, 1995). These programs employ curricula designed to improve the social, problem-solving, and anger management skills of young offenders. While curricula vary, most employ an interactive, exercise-based, skill-building model that extends

over an average of 10-15 sessions of an hour or so duration (Brewer, et al., 1996).

Evaluations conducted on such programs indicate that they are generally effective in improving social skills, as measured by their response to hypothetical conflict solutions (Brewer, et al., 1996). An evaluation of a program undertaken with juvenile probationers in Massachusetts demonstrated significant reductions in subsequent juvenile violence (Romano, 1996). More importantly, this program, sponsored by the Boston Juvenile Court for several years now, attests to the viability of such programming within the juvenile probation context.

Given the aforementioned growth in juvenile violence attributed to firearms, prevention programs targeted on this area warrant consideration. Unfortunately, very little has been done: "Programs that intervene with young people who use guns or have been caught with guns unfortunately are rare and in dire need of further development." (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1996, p.16).

Nonetheless, initiating more efforts in this area makes sense. Studies of handgun possession by youth indicate that handguns are more likely to be owned by individuals with a prior record of violent behavior, particularly where the gun is illegal (OJJDP, 1996). This suggests a real potential pay-off in targeting juvenile probationers.

Firearm prevention programs have been undertaken in several juvenile jurisdictions, though thus far little evaluative information is available. Pima County Arizona Juvenile Court, for example, operates a course for youth who, though not chronic offenders, are before the court for offenses involving the carrying or firing of a gun or youth who have been identified as being at risk for firearm use. Parents are required to attend these educational sessions, where the law governing gun use and the dangers implicit in unauthorized use are explained (OJJDP, 1996).

Given the extent of the violence problem, further experimentation and evolution seems highly warranted. Moreover, a greater reliance on substantive group-work modalities offers a common-sense alternative to the traditional and exhausted model of one-on-one contact, cynically derided within the profession as "fifteen-minutes-of-avoiding-eye-contact-once-a-month."

The Prospects Ahead

The five reforms recommended above constitute a modest and therefore doable agenda, not one that would likely entail additional large expenditures but would rely on re-allocating existing resources and redeploying current staff. Implementing them will not deliver utopian, crime-free communities in the next millennium, but we have reason to believe they would be worth the effort.

Progressive administrators will no doubt consider such initiatives, as well as others. As to the rest, a changing climate in governmental circles may compel the reluctant and unimaginative to undertake steps toward building a system both more effective and more congruent with public atti-

tudes and expectations (Corbett, 1996). In the face of disturbing projections for future rates of youthful violence, immediate action would not seem premature.

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