

Beyond Blame and Panic

Institutional Strategies for Preventing
and Controlling Adolescent Violence

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The Vera Institute of Justice is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making government policies more fair, humane, and efficient for all people. Working in close collaboration with government officials, Vera designs and implements innovative programs that encourage just practices in public services and improve the quality of urban life. Vera operates demonstration projects in partnership with government, conducts original research, and provides technical assistance to public officials in New York and throughout the world.

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Preface

Adolescents who feel connected to their parents, families, and schools are healthier and safer than those who lack these connections. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health confirm this common wisdom and prove its veracity independent of race, ethnicity, family structure, and income.¹ The study suggests that, for parents, it is more important to be emotionally available than to be home every day after school or every evening for dinner. And two of the most helpful things teachers can do are to successfully communicate care and concern and to treat students fairly.

These findings are hardly surprising, yet their announcement in the *New York Times* was striking because we hear so little these days about simply caring for young people.² We hear much more about fearing and punishing them. But while the study validates intuition, it also raises difficult questions: How can we foster vital, positive connections for young people in less stable families, schools, and neighborhoods? Our child welfare agencies, courts, and schools serve kids desperate for guidance and grounding but often hard to handle. How can we make these government systems more responsive to young people?

Three years ago, the Vera Institute focused its exploratory research and project planning on adolescent violence and institutional responses to youth crime. When we began this work, national policymakers and the public scrambled to react to what was perceived as an epidemic of juvenile violence and a new, more aggressive generation of young offenders. Recent decreases in juvenile violent crime rates, especially homicide, have relieved some of the anxiety around this issue in some places. Yet serious problems remain. Levels of adolescent violence are still too high, and public debate continues over the proper role of schools, juvenile courts, and child welfare agencies.

In April 1997, as our research and planning moved us toward concrete demonstration projects, Vera hosted a residential workshop on adolescent violence at Arden House in Harriman, New York. The event brought together researchers, child welfare administrators, school principals, judges, federal officials, foundation officers, and other practitioners—an extraordinarily diverse group of experts working in more than a half dozen major cities across the United States. I am personally grateful to each of them for their contributions, summarized in the pages that follow. A list of participants is included on the last page.

This booklet outlines strategies for reducing adolescent violence that emerged from the Arden House meetings. Each depends on increasing openness in government systems that deal with children, integrating separate public systems, and forging new public/private partnerships. The booklet begins with a summary of recent research findings that clarify what really happened during the so-called epidemic of youth violence and point to some solutions to the problem. The pages that follow the research summary describe practical innovations in courts, child welfare agencies, schools, and community-based organizations. Perhaps the most striking insight to emerge from the workshop is also the simplest: that in each of these institutions our best hope is to connect caring adults to adolescents in honest, unambiguous relationships.

Christopher E. Stone
Director, Vera Institute of Justice
March 1998

¹ For a copy of "Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth," write to Burness Communications, 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 1401, Bethesda, MD 20814.

² Susan Gilbert, "Youth Study Elevates Family's Role," *New York Times*, September 10, 1997, Lifestyle section.

The Problem of Adolescent Violence

Reducing violence by young people depends on understanding the size and nature of the problem, and knowing how current violence compares with past trends. Rigorous quantitative and qualitative research can help guide effective policies and institutional responses. Unfortunately, alarming crime statistics and shocking accounts of violent acts can eclipse even the best research. Between 1984 and 1994, some measures of adolescent violence indicated steep increases, while others showed stability. Yet, during this decade, the press portrayed adolescent violence as occurring in epidemic proportions and with unparalleled brutality. Many institutional responses were guided by, and in turn supported, these beliefs.

PREVALENCE, INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY LEVELS, AND LETHALITY

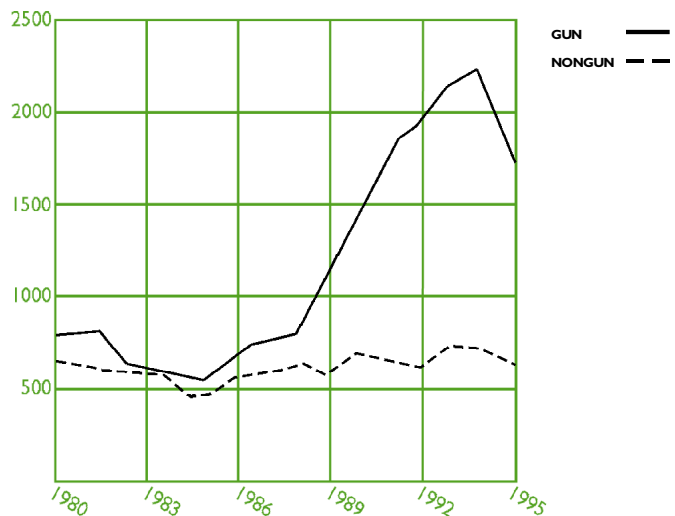
According to Delbert Elliott, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, the proportion of juveniles involved in serious violence has remained remarkably steady. Surveys administered in 1992, 1982, and 1967 show that about one in every five high-school seniors report being involved in a serious fight.

Elliott also maintains that there has been no change in individual offending rates. In other words, serious violence has not become more prevalent among teens, and those who are violent do not engage in violence more frequently than violent teens surveyed in previous surveys. Beginning in the 80s, however, Elliott says there was a sharp increase in the number of offenses involving weapons. Franklin Zimring, director of the Earl Warren Legal Institute at the University of California at Berkeley and Jeffrey Fagan, director of the Center for Violence Research and Prevention at Columbia University, agree with Elliott. All three believe that the stakes of

violent conflicts among teens changed dramatically. More young people were carrying guns, and more of them were being killed by guns. Between 1984 and 1994, the number of known juvenile homicide offenders more than doubled, as did the number of young murder victims. Both increases were almost entirely the result of gun violence. During the same period, the murder rate among adults remained steady. According to Fagan, the overwhelming presence of guns in a neighborhood encourages young people to carry their own weapon, and guns dramatically affect how ordinary conflicts among adolescents are played out. "Fighting has always been a male rite of passage," says Fagan, "but death was rarely a consequence."

These findings give greater definition to the highly publicized rise in juvenile arrests for violent crime. Between 1987 and 1994, the rate of arrests jumped 70 percent, with the greatest increases in aggravated assault and murder. Franklin Zimring believes that the rise in arrests for aggravated assault reflects changing police practices in response to the growing number of armed offenders, rather than an increase in the number of juveniles committing violent offenses.

Known Juvenile Homicide Offenders by Gun and Nongun 1980-1995 (Based on FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports)



DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS AND DANGERS

Violence may be common among male adolescents, but most teens involved in violent confrontations do not become long-term, chronic offenders. According to Delbert Elliott, participation in serious violence usually begins around the age of 14, is often preceded by petty criminal behavior, and peaks in the late teens. By the time these adolescents reach their early 20s, most have abandoned violent behavior. However, Elliott suspects that increases in the juvenile murder and arrest rates, combined with other social factors, have extended the aging out process for many. In recent surveys, more 19 and 20-year-olds are reporting violent behavior. This “protracted state of adolescence,” as Elliott calls it, is especially pronounced among African-American males, who are more than twice as likely as white males to extend their violent offending into adulthood. The trend does not occur, however, among black men who find stable employment and form secure intimate relationships.

Elliott also identifies a less common but more troubling developmental pattern, in which violence begins before adolescence and continues unabated. According to Elliott, about half of violent adults showed signs of serious disruptive behavior during early childhood. Identifying these children and changing their behavior before their teenage years would not significantly reduce adolescent violence, but it could prevent a great deal of serious violence spread over several decades. Emerging evidence from a separate study suggests that young children exposed to prolonged, high levels of violence, even as witnesses, can develop a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to Dr. Felton Earls, principal investigator for the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, PTSD in these children is marked by nervousness, withdrawal, and sometimes by violent behavior during the preteen years.

PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

For almost three years, Vera ethnographer Pedro Mateu-Gelabert has been observing daily events at La Escuelita Middle School (La Escuelita is a fictional name; the school’s real name and other identifiers are confidential.) Unlike most other public schools, La Escuelita is the product of a partnership between the Board of Education and a community-based organization, and the school defines its mission in terms of the community’s strengths and needs.

Most of the community’s residents are poor Latino families; many are recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic. Drugs, crime, and violence are big problems in the neighborhood, and youth gangs are prevalent. To respond to these and other local issues, the school functions as a full-service community center, open seven days a week. The school houses a health clinic, and counseling center. It operates afterschool programs for kids, evening adult education classes, and cultural programs. La Escuelita is also trying to improve relations between the community and the police. The school holds workshops on Latino culture for local officers, encourages them to meet informally with students, and seeks their support when gang problems flare up.

As a result, when conflicts between kids occur—whether fights happen on school grounds or elsewhere in the neighborhood—parents and other adults are informed and encouraged to help solve the problem. According to Mateu-Gelabert, when parents, teachers, school counselors, and community leaders join forces and confront problems head-on, kids are more likely to listen and change their behavior before serious incidents occur. “My experiences at La Escuelita have convinced me that children respond to adults. If you build supports for kids, they will come to you.”

SOLUTIONS

While researchers continue to chart levels and patterns of adolescent violence, they are also documenting some clear solutions to the problem. Research by Felton Earls in Chicago suggests that violence is less common in neighborhoods with a strong sense of community, cohesion, and shared values.³ According to him, one of the most important characteristics of such neighborhoods is willingness by residents to intervene in the lives of young children and discourage delinquency.

John Devine, director of a tutoring program that matches New York University graduate students with students in some of the city’s most troubled

high schools, also believes in the power of adults to help kids stay safe and succeed. Unfortunately, he sees the opposite trend in New York City's largest high schools. According to him, the role and influence of those teachers is shrinking. "They are less involved with students than ever. They have abandoned moral leadership and stopped disciplining students, and they restrict their duties to the classroom." In his experience, teachers are more likely to walk by students fighting than to break up a fight, and few teachers talk to students about their problems. In the words of many kids, "They don't hassle us."

John Devine believes that in smaller, egalitarian schools teachers are less overwhelmed, have more energy to get involved, and are less afraid to confront kids and challenge negative behaviors. It would be a mistake, however, to think of teachers as the only—or even the primary—support for kids, especially those who have the greatest needs.

Vera's ethnographic research in New York City, headed by Mercer Sullivan, is showing that it takes broad social networks of parents, educators, police, and other responsible adults to protect young people. Without this web of support, kids seek their own solutions when threatened. The research focuses on three very different New York City middle schools and their surrounding communities. Sullivan and his colleagues, Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, Barbara Miller, and Joseph Richardson, are exploring the interaction between context—especially the school environment—and development as they observe 75 young people growing up in dangerous urban neighborhoods.

Early adolescence, particularly the middle school years, can be very stressful. With the onset of puberty, bodies change rapidly. Kids experience more independence than ever, but also feel less secure. Peers assume more importance as role models and authority figures. And it is a time when many kids first make decisions about staying in school, engaging in sexual activity, using drugs, and carrying a weapon. Sullivan and his colleagues believe that kids who have relationships with competent and caring adults are more

likely to survive these stressful experiences intact. It may sound easy, but providing adequate support for kids most at risk demands forging strong links among families, schools, government agencies, and community groups.

The changes in adolescent violence over the last decade present twin challenges: to intervene early with the most troubled children, particularly those who have suffered abuse, neglect, or persistent exposure to violence; and to engage with violent adolescents despite the prevalence of weapons in their hands. The rest of this report describes efforts by officials working in courts, child welfare agencies, public schools, and community-based organizations to meet these challenges—not by themselves in isolated encounters, but by changing the institutions they represent.

INFORMATION SOURCES

- Delbert Elliott, Ph.D., Director, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute for Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, Campus Box 442, Boulder, Colorado 80309-0442, tel (303) 492-1032.
- Melissa Sickmund, Howard N. Snyder, and Eileen Poe-Yamagata. *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1997 Update on Violence* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997).
- Franklin E. Zimring, Director, Earl Warren Legal Institute, University of California at Berkeley School of Law, Boalt Hall, Berkeley, California 94720, tel (510) 642-0854, fax 643-2698.
- Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D., Director, Center for Violence Research and Prevention, School of Public Health, Columbia University, 600 West 168th Street, 5th Floor, New York, New York 10032, tel (212) 305-7748, fax 305-8280.
- Felton Earls, M.D., Director, Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115, tel (617) 432-1227, fax 432-3448.
- John Devine, Director, School Partnership Program, Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at the New York University School of Education, 82 Washington Street East, Suite 72, New York, New York 10003, tel (212) 998-5120, fax 432-3448.
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Linking Courts and Communities to Educate Juvenile Weapons Offenders

Every Saturday morning at nine o'clock, about 40 adolescents and young adults charged with gun offenses file into Judge Willie Lipscomb's courtroom. They come to participate in the Handgun Intervention Program that Judge Lipscomb developed several years ago in response to the skyrocketing number of young black men being shot and killed in Detroit. For three hours, the judge and a few other adults work hard to challenge what most of the young participants believe: that guns protect them. Straight talk is the rule here. Former weapons offenders describe violent encounters and talk about how those incidents changed their lives. Their stories provide hard evidence that people who chose to carry a gun and "step into the life" are more likely to put themselves and those they love in dangerous situations.

The Handgun Intervention Program attempts to change other attitudes as well. "One of my primary goals is to convince young people that adults care about what happens to them and can help them stay safe and be successful," says Judge Lipscomb. According to him, many of the young men who attend the program do not have ongoing relationships with their fathers, so the judge uses the program as an opportunity to do what

For people like Judge Willie Lipscomb who run brief weapons education programs, the challenge is to make a big impression on kids in just a few hours. To succeed, the messages have to be clear and credible, and the program has to connect kids with adults who can support them informally over time.

any good father or positive adult role model would do: set high expectations and encourage kids to meet his challenges. He refers to the young people he meets as ambassadors and tells them that they are the solution, not only to their own troubles but also to the biggest problems facing their communities.

Early research by the Urban Institute on the Handgun Intervention Program shows that even a four-hour educational program can change attitudes about guns. The challenge is to make these new attitudes stick—to get kids on the right track before they hurt themselves or someone else. Judge Lipscomb knows that only sustained interventions can have lasting effects, so he invites leaders of local community-based organizations to talk about groups and activities for young people. This aspect of the program is critical: When the justice system cannot maintain contact with juvenile offenders beyond a brief intervention, it is important to connect kids with adults who can support them informally over time.

INFORMATION SOURCES

The Honorable Willie G. Lipscomb, Jr., 36th District Court, 421 Madison Avenue, Suite 3069, Detroit, Michigan 48226, tel (313) 965-8730, fax 965-3951.

Jennifer Trone and Darlene Jorif, *Teaching Brain Power, Not Gun Power: Low-Intensity, Low-Cost Programs for Juvenile Weapons Offenders* (New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 1997).

Tailoring Adult Courts to Meet the Needs of Serious Young Offenders

Judge Michael Corriero says that “the greatest alternative to detention is paying attention to the young people who come into our courtrooms.” He presides over New York City’s Youth Part, a special division of adult criminal court that hears cases of juveniles between the ages of 13 and 15 who are accused of serious and violent crimes—usually robbery, assault, and rape. The Youth Part was created in 1992 to concentrate judicial resources for serious young offenders in a single courtroom and to encourage alternatives to incarceration whenever appropriate. Its existence proves that it is possible for adult courts to help rehabilitate juvenile offenders.

This is how it works: A central screening agency interviews each defendant and submits a report on the juvenile’s family background and community ties, involvement in the current crime, and potential for change. Based on this report and the judge’s own evaluation, Judge Corriero decides whether to give the adolescent a second chance or to allow the case to proceed to trial in the adult court. Those kids who get a second chance are placed under the supervision of a community-based program. When Judge Corriero chooses community supervision, he does so with confidence because he knows the people who run these programs and how they operate.

Judge Michael Corriero presides over New York City’s Youth Part, a special division of adult criminal court that hears the cases of young teens accused of serious and violent crimes. His work proves that adult courts can be modified to respond to the needs of juvenile offenders.

One of the interesting things about Judge Corriero’s practice is that he stays involved with these teens and becomes invested in whether they succeed. Every week, either he or one of his clerks talks with the program managers. “I’m only a week away from anything significant happening in the children’s lives,” says Judge Corriero. “Plus, they know that I am concerned about them, that I want them to succeed, and that I believe they can succeed.” Every three weeks these juveniles come to court and talk to the judge about progress or setbacks. For those in danger of failing in a program, Judge Corriero requires stricter supervision and additional court appearances. Occasionally, he puts kids back in detention for a few days to remind them of the consequences of their actions.

The adolescents who succeed receive probation and “youthful offender treatment,” which means that their criminal record is sealed. Those who fail or are re-arrested are prosecuted as adults, and the judge may impose a sentence that is longer than the prosecutor originally requested. Judge Corriero feels that giving even serious young offenders a chance to reform their behavior and avoid the stigmatization of a felony conviction pays off: A criminal record is one of the largest obstacles to employment. And unemployed ex-offenders are more likely to commit new crimes.

INFORMATION SOURCE

The Honorable Michael Corriero, Judge of the Court of Claims, Presiding Judge, New York City Youth Part, 111 Centre Street, New York, New York 10013, tel (212) 374-7155, fax 374-2634.

Making Community Supervision Responsive to Individual Needs

COMPASS, which stands for Community Providers of Adolescent Services, is a fitting acronym for an organization that helps troubled adolescents find their way in the world. One of many things COMPASS does is supervise and support juvenile offenders who have been committed to the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services until their eighteenth birthday. Some of these teens are placed with COMPASS in lieu of detention; others are returning to the community after having been detained.

The adults who do this work are called trackers. At any one time, a tracker can supervise about seven kids. The caseload may seem small, but, according to Margaret Nicholson, director of community services, “It’s a lot of work. You go to school; the kid’s not there. You check home; he’s not there. Then you go to certain hangouts, to the Y. Eventually, you find him. Tracking is a very appropriate job title.” But trackers do more than just chase after kids. They are resource specialists who work with everyone involved in a young person’s life. Their job is to bring together families, schools, courts, child welfare agencies, and community organizations in order to form a lasting support system for these kids. In other words, their goal is to gradually supplant their own services with natural community supports. As Margaret Nicholson says, “From the

At COMPASS, supervising juvenile offenders means preparing them and their families for life after supervision. It means coalescing private and public resources to form an effective and stable support system. Since no one model of support works for everyone, COMPASS adapts its services to fit the needs and strengths of each family.

first knock on the door, we prepare the child and the family for life after tracking.”

Most of these kids have a history of chronic truancy and educational failure, and many are several grade levels behind, so trackers focus on school attendance and performance. They consider whether kids need special educational services to address learning or developmental disabilities and whether kids would benefit from changing schools. Most important, they help parents get involved in their children’s education. According to Margaret Nicholson, many parents say that school is important but have never met their kids’ teachers and do not talk about school with their children. Trackers also accompany kids and parents to court hearings and submit progress reports to the court.

In terms of outcomes, COMPASS focuses on concrete achievements: school attendance and performance, participation in extracurricular activities or afterschool employment, physical appearance, and whether kids’ actions reflect increased self-esteem and a sense of accountability to themselves and their families. COMPASS also measures the progress of parents by looking at whether they are in regular contact with schools, community groups, and government agencies, and if they feel good about these contacts. Margaret Nicholson believes that COMPASS succeeds because tracking is different for every kid. “We adapt the basic service to fit each child and family.”

INFORMATION SOURCE

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Adapting Foster Care to Rehabilitate Chronic Juvenile Offenders

despite widespread belief in the value of adult supervision and the risk of association with delinquent peers, most programs for juvenile offenders treat them in group settings and emphasize peer-mediated therapy. Research by Dr. Patricia Chamberlain of the Oregon Social Learning Center reveals the flaws in this approach and finds promise in an interesting alternative, specialized foster care.

Dr. Chamberlain's study compares treatment in group homes with an enhanced form of foster care called treatment foster care (TFC). Chamberlain's subjects are male offenders between the ages of 12 and 17 with a history of criminal behavior, including felony-level offenses. All were in detention before joining the study and were approved for community placement by a judge. The boys were randomly assigned to either group home care or TFC.

Patricia Chamberlain of the Oregon Social Learning Center questions the wisdom of placing juvenile offenders in facilities that emphasize peer-mediated therapy. When she compared boys treated in group homes with those placed in specialized foster care, she found that boys in the foster care group were less likely to reoffend following treatment. The reasons: They spent more time with caretaking adults than with delinquent peers, and they felt liked and understood by their foster parents.

Boys in group home care lived with 5 to 15 other young offenders and attended a special school on the group home campus. Boys in TFC lived with families but most attended schools affiliated with group homes. TFC parents received enhanced training and support. They were taught to set clear expectations, use consistent, nonphysical, teaching-oriented discipline, encourage high academic achievement, and help kids develop and pursue interests outside of school. And they had supports and benefits unavailable to most foster parents: 24-hour access to child welfare caseworkers, weekly group support meetings with other TFC parents, planned respite from their parenting responsibilities, and greater financial compensation. Yet, according to Chamberlain, treatment foster care is still cheaper than group home care.

At the same time, child welfare workers focused on these kids' first families—the ones most of the boys returned to when treatment ended. The goal was to look at what was working in the foster home and to help parents carry on these practices when their child returned home. Once parents understood the concepts, home visits began, and they occurred more frequently as treatment progressed.

According to Chamberlain's research, after just three months, the two environments produced very different responses from kids: TFC kids spent more time alone with caretaking adults and less time with peers. They engaged in less rule-breaking and problem behaviors but were disciplined more often. And fewer TFC kids had run away or been sent back to detention.

Given accepted predictors of delinquency, the longer-term affects of TFC compared with group home care are not surprising. Twelve months after treatment ended, boys who had been in treatment foster care had lower arrest rates and lower self-reported rates of delinquency than

Treatment foster care active ingredients:

- **Frequent and high-quality adult supervision and support**
- **Consistent and fair discipline**
- **Eliminating relations with delinquent peers**

boys who had received group home care. In addition, the TFC group had better school performance, and fewer of them used drugs or experienced ongoing mental health problems.

According to Chamberlain, it all comes down to whether kids are connecting with adults or with delinquent peers: “It’s been said that by the time youngsters reach their teenage years, adults have little impact on them and peers are the only powerful force. Our results challenge this notion. Those boys who felt liked and understood by their foster parents were less likely to commit crimes following treatment. On the flip side, boys who were more connected with delinquent peers were more likely to continue their criminal behavior.”

Chamberlain’s study has two important implications for people interested in rehabilitating juvenile offenders. First, it proves that with appropriate preparation and support, foster parents can control serious juvenile delinquents and improve their behavior. Second, it indicates that group homes for juvenile offenders would be more effective if the role of adults was expanded to supersede the negative impact of delinquent peers. Additionally, her findings suggest that parenting practices developed to rehabilitate juvenile offenders might also improve outcomes for children in traditional foster care.

Chamberlain’s study illustrates what can be gained when researchers and practitioners work together. According to Sally Hillsman, deputy director of the National Institute of Justice, such partnerships can be fruitful and can avoid common pitfalls, such as focusing only on main effects. Chamberlain’s study is valuable to practitioners because it shows *why* treatment foster care works. If she had simply compared the TFC and group home care in terms of outcomes, or main effects—delinquency, drug use, and mental health—her findings would have less impact on future policies and practices.

INFORMATION SOURCES

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Bridging Delinquency and Dependency Systems

The long-term effects of child abuse are well documented. Research, like the recent Rochester Youth Development Study, shows that when survivors of childhood maltreatment reach adolescence, they are more likely than other teens to engage in serious and violent delinquency, become pregnant, use drugs, fail in school, and experience mental health problems. In other words, for these kids, growing up is very hard. And for those trying to guide them into adulthood—parents, foster parents, and group home caregivers—the problems can be overwhelming.

Delinquency is only one area of concern, but the odds are striking. Dr. Kathy Spatz-Widom found that children who have been the subject of abuse and neglect cases are 53 percent more likely to be arrested than kids who have never been involved in the child welfare system. According to criminal justice and child welfare officials in Los Angeles and New York City, helping these kids and preventing future crimes depends on bridging the two systems.

California State law prohibits juveniles from being supervised by both dependency and delinquency courts, but until recently, poor communication between the two systems made the law meaningless. Thanks to the efforts of a special task force led by Michael Nash, presiding judge of the juvenile dependency and delinquency courts, the courts now share a database that automatically checks new delinquency records against child welfare records, flags overlap cases, and issues a Dependency/Delinquency Early Alert Report (DEAR) to the appropriate judge in the delinquency court, the department of probation, and the Division for Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Once alerted, the judge orders interagency planning. The assigned caseworker and probation officer meet and exchange information about the

juvenile, and then each submits a written report to the court recommending which system—child welfare or juvenile justice—should assume primary responsibility for the child. Juveniles who remain in the child welfare system live with foster families or in group homes. A special high-risk unit—led by the Department of Children and Family Services and including representatives from probation, mental health, and education—assesses each juvenile and develops a service plan intended to protect the child and the community from future harm. Caseworkers in this unit have smaller workloads in order to give them the time it takes to get to know kids and earn their trust. When these caseworkers are successful, they become mentors, role models, and respected authority figures in kids' lives. The caseworkers provide ongoing support for foster families and group home staff as well as immediate and intensive help during crisis situations. The entire high-risk unit meets periodically to review cases.

According to Jay Lindgren, who recently became director of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, launching a multidisciplinary, intensive unit like the one in Los Angeles means working against the grain. In his experience, frontline service providers rarely understand how their work affects the larger system. Often, they want their jobs to be as narrow as possible in order to protect themselves from failure and blame. To reverse this trend, frontline workers need strong organizational support, more resources, and commitment to producing better outcomes for children. Even in his small state, which unites child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health in a single agency, the departments within the agency are entrenched and separate from one another. He is working to improve collaboration and boost accountability. The words of one longtime foster child he met recently remind him of the desperate need for reform: “My family are shitty

Bridging delinquency and dependency systems can:

- **Reduce unnecessary detention**
- **Conserve public funds by placing kids in the community instead of in more costly detention centers**
- **Prevent future delinquency and increase public safety**
- **Improve the social, educational, and employment opportunities available to some of society's most disadvantaged young people**

people, but they're mine. And you've yet to come up with anything that feels like mine."

In New York City, the Vera Institute of Justice is working with the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the police, the family courts, and juvenile probation to improve communications among these agencies and to develop procedures for handling dependency/delinquency cases, especially those involving foster kids who live in congregate care facilities. Too often, these adolescents shuttle between group home placements and detention centers, mainly because group homes cannot provide the supervision and support they need. Exasperated group home staff often call the police and ask them to arrest kids they cannot control.

Vera's preliminary research supports what many practitioners in New York City believe: When kids living in group homes are arrested, they are more likely than other juvenile offenders to be detained. Last spring, Vera surveyed teens entering Spofford, the City's detention facility for juveniles younger than 16. We found that many teens who came from group homes were eligible for release, but neither their group home caregiver nor their ACS caseworker had appeared in court. Interviews with older adolescents who were detained in Rikers Island, New York City's main jail, revealed similar findings. Currently, there is no effective way to alert child welfare caseworkers when a foster child is arrested. If the group home refuses to readmit a teen who was arrested, and the court cannot contact the appropriate ACS

official, judges have no choice but to detain the juvenile. Everyone involved acknowledges that this is a poor solution. Detention is twice as expensive as group home care; it offers few rehabilitation services; and every time a juvenile is detained, the chances of re-arrest increase.

Vera hopes to help the city implement pretrial conferencing practices like those in Los Angeles to avoid unnecessary detention. Equally important, the Institute plans to strengthen the ability of group homes to care for difficult teens by enlisting support from nonresidential, community-based youth organizations. These groups have years of experience working with teens who are hard to handle and redirect. The involvement of these groups will lessen the burden on group home staff, who should not be expected to succeed on their own. In the words of Judge Michael Gage, head of New York City's Family Court, "The point of this work is to ensure that the State is not the most neglectful parent of all."

INFORMATION SOURCES

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Developing Court-Based Resource Coordination

s the supervising judge for the family court in Buffalo, New York, Sharon Townsend sees young people who have come through the abuse and neglect system and are back in family court as truants, runaways, or juvenile delinquents. According to Judge Townsend, everybody—social services, mental health, schools, probation, the division for youth—expects the court to find a program that meets the person’s educational, social, and emotional needs. Many of these kids have serious emotional problems but do not belong in mental health treatment facilities. Many have serious conduct disorders but may not need residential placement. And many of the girls are pregnant. Making the right disposition is not easy.

Family court judges meet kids who need a great deal of help in order to avoid future delinquency and harm. Placing them in residential facilities away from home may not be the best response, but too often judges have no other options. By uniting local government and nonprofit agencies and hiring a court-based resource coordinator, Judge Sharon Townsend is enabling more of the troubled kids who come through Buffalo family courtrooms to receive the services they need while living in the community.

Faced with so many kids who are hard-to-place because they do not fit neatly in any one program, Judge Townsend decided to bring together everyone in Buffalo who might have part of the solution. She included police and probation officers, mental health specialists, special education administrators, and directors of local nonprofit and religious groups who work with kids. In a series of meetings, these professionals from very different systems and environments got to know one another, and slowly they built a foundation for working together. Their goal: to enable more juveniles to receive services in the community, instead of being placed in residential facilities away from home.

To facilitate continued open communication and collaboration, Judge Townsend hired a resource coordinator who works with these service providers to develop service plans for the most needy and difficult kids. Once a plan is established, the coordinator follows up to confirm that it is working as expected or to revise it. As these efforts develop, Judge Townsend and others will identify specific case outcomes against which to measure longer-term success.

INFORMATION SOURCE

The Honorable Sharon Townsend, Supervising Judge, Family Court, Eight Judicial District, 25 Delaware Street, Buffalo, New York 14202, tel (716) 858-8100, fax 858-8432.

Supporting Foster Kids in Schools

Younger adolescents in foster care spend more active time in school than anywhere else. And for many of them, ties with teachers, counselors, and schoolmates are the most stable relationships they have. In Los Angeles and New York City, child welfare and school officials are preserving and strengthening these ties by developing formal school-based supports for foster kids.

According to Nathana Schooler, special projects coordinator for the Los Angeles Unified School District, until recently, many kids in foster care group homes were kept out of school because school staff did not know how to enroll them. Some simply said, “We don’t take group home kids.” Attitudes and behaviors have changed dramatically in a few parts of the district since Nathana Schooler and others began a series of trainings to help child welfare and school workers understand each others’ jobs and work together to support students in foster care.

Initially, she focused most of her energy on a middle school in a city within the school district called Pacoima. Pacoima boasts a community-based placement project, which tries to place kids within their home communities and school districts. As part of this project, child protective services organizes a case planning conference within 30 days after children enter the system and holds follow-up meetings periodically. The meetings also involve representatives from the departments of health and mental health, foster parents, parents and/or natural birth parents, and children over the age of ten. Before Nathana started working in Pacoima, school staff were not invited to participate in case conferences.

“I remember the first meeting I attended. I was not given the case file in advance, so I had to read it during the meeting. The student was an eighth grader with a history of running away from home. She had been detained at MacLaren

Hall, an emergency shelter, and psychological testing completed there showed that she was very depressed and needed to be in a residential facility. And that’s where the meeting was leading. But her school records showed that she did very well when she attended and participated in extracurricular activities. I felt that she would be fine in a foster home. By asking her questions, I learned that she had run away because her stepfather had been abusing her and that she had not run away from her current foster home because her foster mother talked to her about the house rules and asked for her opinions. She remained in foster care after that meeting.”

According to Nathana Schooler, school participation in these conferences has grown because their input has proven valuable. Now, whoever knows the student best comes to the case planning conference. It might be the principal, if the child is very difficult, or a guidance counselor, or maybe a teacher. Her experiences have convinced her that kids should also participate in these meetings. She remembers one conference where neither the child nor a school representative was present.

“The boy really wanted to go home, but child protective services decided he should stay in foster care for another six months. When he heard about the decision from one of his siblings, he immediately went outside and beat up a kid so badly that the paramedics had to treat him. I’m sure that if he had been at the meeting and if someone he trusted from school had explained the decision, no one would have been hurt, and he wouldn’t have ended up in juvenile hall.”

In addition to boosting school participation in case conferences, the Pacoima School Collaborative developed afterschool groups for kids and support groups for foster parents. Nathana Schooler believes that by working together more kids will be able to remain in their home

What to expect from school-based services:

- Improved attendance and academic performance
- Fewer suspensions, violence, and transfers that result from behavior problems
- Elimination of gaps in services when placement and school transfers occur

communities, and more of them eventually will return home. She also expects decreases in violence, because—as the previous story illustrates—when kids are pulled out of their neighborhoods and removed from friends and family, they get angry easily.

The approach Nathana Schooler developed in Pacoima Middle School is being replicated in other community-based placement projects in Los Angeles. “We’re having preliminary discussions with school staff in each of these communities, so that they feel part of a project that helps foster kids remain in their own communities and succeed in school.” In addition, the school district is hiring education specialists in each community to provide direct services to foster children and their families and to bridge the gap between child welfare and the school system.

Mei Lan Loi, a planner at the Vera Institute, believes that large workloads and administrative responsibilities prevent most child welfare caseworkers from spending time with the kids they supervise. Usually, caseworkers see kids for an hour once or twice a month. “Kids get intensive support only when a crisis erupts,” says Mei Lan Loi. “Then, there is a crescendo of adult attention that often results in moving them to a new home and a new school.” According to her, severing school ties can lead to serious problems, including an increased risk of victimization and aggression. One middle school student she met was held up at knifepoint on the first day he went to a new school. He had no friends to back him up and no adults to turn to for support.

Mei Lan Loi acknowledges that some transfers are necessary, but she believes that many can be avoided by responding to problems before they

reach crisis-level. According to her, “Foster kids need help coping with what is an inherently difficult and stressful situation and one that may not be resolved exactly the way the kids would prefer—Mom may not finish her drug treatment program, get a stable job, and be able to take care of them. I believe that schools are the best places to reach out to foster kids and help them deal with their problems.” In some schools, guidance counselors fulfill this supportive role, but according to Mei Lan Loi, in large, urban schools there are not enough counselors—and they have too many other responsibilities—to provide sustained support to foster kids.

Over the past two years, Mei Lan Loi has been working with the New York City Administration for Children’s Services, school officials, and foster kids to design and test a new and hybrid role, which she calls “school specialist.” According to her, “The idea is to have one adult in the school every day who is focused on the educational success, safety, and health of kids in foster care.” In addition to providing direct support to kids during and after school, the school specialist tries to locate and support other adults—relatives, leaders of community-based organizations, teachers, and others—who can spend quality time with these kids. And much like Nathana Schooler’s work in Los Angeles, the school specialist also helps bridge the gap between child welfare and school staff. The goal is to get all of the adults—teachers, guidance counselors, caseworkers and foster parents—working in concert to address the needs of foster kids.

INFORMATION SOURCES

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In April 1997, the Vera Institute of Justice hosted a residential workshop at Arden House in Harriman, New York entitled, “Reducing Adolescent Violence in Urban America: Schools, Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, and Communities Working Together.” Organized by senior planner Molly Armstrong and senior research fellow Mercer Sullivan, the workshop brought together a wide range of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The following is a list of panelists and moderators along with their titles and institutional affiliations. “Reducing Adolescent Violence in Urban America” was funded by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Daniel and Florence Guggenheim Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Pinkerton Foundation, and the William T. Grant Foundation.

Molly Armstrong, Senior Planner, Vera Institute of Justice

Patricia Chamberlain, Ph.D., Director, Treatment Foster Care Studies, Oregon Social Learning Center, Eugene, Oregon

The Honorable Michael Corriero, Judge, New York State Court of Claims and Presiding Judge, New York County Youth Part

John Devine, Director, School Partnership Program, Metropolitan Center for Urban Education and Adjunct Professor, New York University School of Education

Felton Earls, M.D., Professor of Child Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, Professor of Human Behavior and Development, Harvard School of Public Health, and Principle Investigator, Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

Delbert Elliott, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Director, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado at Boulder

Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D., Professor of Sociomedical Sciences, Columbia University School of Public Health and Director, Center for Violence Research and Prevention at Columbia

The Honorable Michael Gage, Administrative Judge, New York City Family Court

Sally T. Hillsman, Deputy Director and Head of Research and Evaluation, National Institute of Justice

Roger Graef, Writer, Filmmaker, Broadcaster, Criminologist, and Creator of “In Search of Law and Order—USA”

Darlene Jorif, Director, Juvenile Justice Project, Correctional Association of New York

Jay G. Lindgren, Jr., Director, Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families

The Honorable Willie G. Lipscomb, Jr., Judge, 36th District Court, Detroit, Michigan and Creator of the Handgun Intervention Program

Mei Lan Loi, Director, Safe and Smart, a Pilot Project of the Vera Institute of Justice

Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, Ph.D., Ethnographer, Vera Institute of Justice

Barbara Miller, Ethnographer, Vera Institute of Justice

The Honorable Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Los Angeles Juvenile Dependency Court

Margaret Nicholson, M.S.W., Director of Community Services, Community Providers of Adolescent Services (COMPASS), Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts

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Joseph Richardson, Ethnographer, Vera Institute of Justice

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