

While no one has a proved solution for dealing with antisocial youngsters, some of the pieces of the solution are known but have not been assembled. The problem is not lack of knowledge but rather lack of money.

There is widespread consensus among professionals in the child-care and juvenile-justice fields about the kind of facility that might be able to treat seriously disruptive teenagers.

It must be capable of providing highly structured, intensive supervision but small enough to become a home that offers flexible, individual care for each resident.

It should be situated in a place, and operated in a way, that enables youngsters, as in a normal family, to grow and develop gradually. Closely and continuously monitored at first, they should be able slowly to widen their experience with a normal community.

The most seriously delinquent adolescents spring from among the most seriously neglected. They hate the world because their world hates them. Since they feel that they have nothing worthwhile to lose, including their own lives, which they regularly risk, threats of punishment are meaningless in dealing with them.

What happens when such youngsters are recognized by the social system as intolerably uncivilized?

They are consigned to a "system" that is organized, primarily in the interest of cost-cutting, to provide the minimum feasible supervision for the shortest possible time.

It is a system of graded institutional care in which the "reward" for adjustment is to be sent away to a more "open" (cheaper to operate) facility.

It is a system that is unwittingly calculated to undermine itself by reaffirming children's belief that they cannot rely on anyone for very long and that they had better not allow themselves to feel attached to or dependent on any social institution.

Antisocial Youths

By Michael A. Pawel

I have seen many youngsters who deliberately tried to get back into detention facilities and training schools by committing delinquent acts. Their attempts were seldom successful.

Who could insist that an antisocial child stay out of an institution while there is a general clamor to get young muggers off the streets? Although there is a widespread, erroneous belief that there are lots of child-care facilities available, in fact the number has been strictly limited by New York State for many years, and the trend has been to close both public and private facilities.

Funding has been deliberately maintained at a level below the most minimal costs in an effort to discourage development of programs. This is a budget area in which levels of service are not immediately noticed by voting constituents.

A high-ranking New York City official recently said to me, explaining why he could not endorse the donation of a vacant city-owned building for a model long-term residence for adolescents said: "We could sell that building for a quarter of a million dollars. That would hire policemen, teachers, or librarians. I'm not sure we want to, in effect, contribute that money to taking a few kids off the streets."

His arithmetic was correct. The cost of providing continuous 24-hour care is very high — at least \$50,000 per child per year if housing overhead is included, and higher if salaries are

raised to the level where they can consistently attract and hold a qualified staff for such demanding work. Initial capital requirements are also substantial.

Cheap supervision is minimal supervision, and the total investment in a single child could easily approach half a million dollars to guarantee intensive residential care through adolescence. On the other hand, a residence providing comprehensive care to 17 potentially delinquent youngsters for 10 years would prevent more than 1,000 street crimes during that period, according to the best available statistics.

What is that worth? And what is the cost of continuing the present shaky system? How many police and court and correctional dollars could be saved by offering unlimited care to youngsters who are most in need and most likely to become socially menacing if not taken off the streets? Would the success of such an approach in reducing recidivism and promoting social peace make it cost-effective in the long run?

These questions would be subject to reasonable debate if we had the data on which to base such a discussion. But research cannot proceed without at least a prototype permanent-treatment home.

Until someone invests in developing model facilities, no one can intelligently argue whether any therapeutic approach works for gravely neglected adolescents.

We devote considerable resources to investigating less-pressing questions.

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