



A new approach to juvenile crime in Alabama

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Preventing juvenile crime can start with preventing child abuse.

Children who are abused or neglected have a myriad of challenges: poor self-esteem, difficulty in school, anxiety or depression. Boys, in particular, are likely to be aggressive and less empathetic toward others. They are often the bullies of the classroom and the last in terms of academic performance.

But there are other, more serious consequences of child abuse that spill out into our communities, state and nation.

Studies show a strong correlation between children who are physically abused and juvenile crime. Abused children are nearly five times as likely to be arrested as juveniles and twice as likely to be arrested as adults. An estimated half of all girls in the state's juvenile detention facilities have been molested.

Most children are in lockups for nonviolent offenses such as unruly behavior, truancy or running away. The 2008 Alabama Kids Count Data Book, published by VOICES for Alabama's Children, breaks down those committed to the Department of Youth Services by county and offense type. The 2008 data book reveals 83 percent of boys and girls sent to juvenile facilities had committed a nonviolent offense. Locking up these low-risk offenders who have often been victims of abuse or neglect adds insult to injury, punishing the symptom of the abuse instead of rooting out its source.

But times are changing.

This month, a new juvenile justice reform law takes effect, requiring hands-on collaboration among juvenile justice practitioners to implement best practices and tested new intervention strategies. Under the direction of Alabama's chief justice, retired Morgan Family Court Judge David Breland is training judges and court personnel around the state to ask the right questions: Is the child being abused? Is there drug use going on? Does a mental health issue exist? What support does the family need to prevent this child from reoffending? The idea is to pinpoint the underlying reason for a child's arrest and match it with an appropriate response. Promising reforms are now under way in all parts of the state.

Children who skip school, participate in underage drinking or run away from home have no business sharing overcrowded facilities with juveniles in for murder, armed robbery or assault. Instead, the new law encourages communities to provide intensive home programs and other locally based services.

The new mandates make sense financially. Institutional living can cost up to \$200 a day per child. Even the most intensive home- and community-based treatment models are a fraction of the cost of incarceration and often offer a two-for-one deal -- counseling for both the adolescent and his parents. Effectively engaging parents and families is seen as crucial to successful youth development.

The best part of the new juvenile law is what it does not do. It does not sacrifice public safety. Dangerous, violent youths are still detained in youth facilities. Yet the new law does not treat children like they are adults. Research tells us that adolescents lack the emotional and mental maturity of adults and should be given a chance to rehabilitate. Flexible and creative responses to a child's anti-social behavior are geared toward the emotional needs of the youngster. Yet offenders are not handled with kid gloves; these programs are mandatory and require full physical, intellectual and emotional participation.

Identifying and addressing factors such as child abuse and neglect that can trigger anti-social behavior is one of the important byproducts of the new reform act. But the long-term, overarching goal is to develop children who will grow up to be productive, wage-earning and law-abiding Alabama citizens. It's a new philosophical approach to an old problem, and one whose time has come.

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