

WORKING WITH YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was delivered as the Key-note Address to open the International Conference on Juvenile Delinquency, Korea, 1984. Eminent scholars and practitioners from throughout the Asian Pacific area, the United States, and Europe and Australia have come together to discuss one of the great problems of industrial societies – what to do with our young people who are in trouble with the law.

Problems of juvenile delinquency appear to be endemic to all industrial societies to a greater or lesser extent. They occur because of the characteristics of industrialisation which require higher and higher degrees of specialisation, extended periods of education and training to develop technical skills, and higher degrees of mobility for smaller and smaller family units.

Until just recently, the number of juvenile offenders had been increasing in American society. Only recently, our Department of Justice has reported a decrease in the extent of youth crime. And, it seems apparent that this decrease is most directly related to a decrease in the proportion of young people in the population than to any other factor; but this relationship (between the decrease in youth crime and the age of population) has yet to be acknowledged by our federal administration.

My own experience with young people in doing youth work between 1945 and 1958 left me with rather confused perceptions of the problem of juvenile delinquency. When I left graduate school in 1953, I took my first job working with a gang group. That's long enough ago now that I can mention the name of the group without violating confidentiality. They were called *the Raiders*. The Raiders were a rather large gang of young men between the ages of 16 and 23. I never quite knew the exact number of members of the gang, because I was best acquainted with what I estimated to be about half of them, 17 in number, who were members of the settlement house for which I worked. The approximate other half were related in varying degrees, from a great deal to none at all, to the activities that I engaged in with *The Raiders* who were members of the settlement house.

In my first weeks of contact with these young men I was, quite frankly, scared to death. They appeared to be tough, aggressive, and raucous, constantly boasting of their accomplishments in fighting, stealing, and other delinquent activities. While I knew, intellectually, that a good deal of this was posturing for and testing of me, I nonetheless was quite intimidated by those fellows. They were

fighters (in the physical sense), appeared to love danger, and were ready to employ their bodies in whatever they did. All things I was uncomfortable about. By my fourth week of work with them, my rather sensitive and supportive supervisor convinced me that I must begin to confront *The Raiders* or forget about working with them. At that first confrontational meeting I had intended to be tough, calm, and cool, but I'm afraid, I ended up shrieking at them instead. I think I was close to tears. I said to them, "Now, you're going to do something for yourselves this year. You've got a lousy basketball team." (I, of course, am probably the most unathletic gangworker ever born). I said they weren't even able to run a dance at the settlement house without stealing the money from one another. I said that "some of you are smart and want to do well but you're afraid to show it". Well I thought that they would chew me up and spit me out. But there was a great silence after my nervous sermon. And then *The Raiders* began to talk about themselves. How the director of the settlement house was threatening to evict them as was always picking on them. How teachers at school were unfair to them. How their parents didn't understand them. And so on and so forth. Well, of course, that meeting was the beginning of great things for me and *some* of *The Raiders*. I worked with that group four years. I succeeded with about two-thirds of the members of the group; I estimate that about one-third were probably lost to the underworld. I don't

believe that at the time I understood the basis for my successes with some of the members of *The Raiders*. I think I do now.

At the time I was very psychotherapeutically oriented. I paid a great deal of attention to the management of relationships with members, with trying to understand feelings, with trying to promote constructive and positive interactions among members and with trying to develop the social and emotional capacities of the members of the group. In retrospect, however, I now believe that the successes I had were strongly determined by my capacity to bring those young men into the world of work, or of training, or of education. Certainly my sensitivity, my concern about processes, my concern about group dynamics, all helped a good deal. But the young men I did best with were the young men who were able to help find jobs or to go to school. I had good relationships with some of those I failed with, and I understand now that these failures were largely attributable to our inability to help them find their way along a path to a career.

There are many theories about the causes and the prevention of delinquency. These include theories about cultural transmission and delinquent subcultures, support by families (broken homes, increase in single-parent households), theories of social and emotional development, cultural and emotional deprivation, the loss of social control and social



mental and emotional deficiency, social learning theories, theories of anomie including opportunity theory, and delinquency and drift, labelling, racism, substance abuse, and so forth. All of these theories are useful in explaining *some* parts of the problem of juvenile delinquency. There *are* indeed, some rejecting and negligent parents, youngsters who become delinquent because they suffer from mental and intellectual and emotional deficiencies, delinquent sub-cultures (like The Raiders). And all of these theories provide us with different lines of thought about intervention – but mostly secondary and tertiary interventions – mostly ideas about what to *do* with youngsters when they *become* delinquent. But we haven't yet – and most certainly not in American society – come close to any broad agreement about the social causes of delinquency, nor do we have any consensus about what is needed to prevent it.

Before I comment further on this I would like to tell you of an experience I had in Hong Kong in 1970. When I left my hotel, the Hong Kong Hilton, early one morning, I was impressed with the age of my elevator operator. He appeared to be about 12 or 13 years old. This was of special note to me because at that time my own two sons were 12 and 14 years of age. When I returned to the hotel late that night I found that my elevator operator was the very same little boy who had taken me down in the morning. He was obviously quite tired, and as we were going up he did a little dance while he was working the elevator, I thought to keep himself entertained. I was quite moved as I watched him, thinking about my own two more-privileged children who did not have work from dawn to sunset. So I said to him, "Gee, you have to work really hard". He was obviously delighted to be able to talk to someone, and when we stopped at my floor he turned and said to me, "Yes, but you know this is a very good job". I said, "Oh, yes, why is that?" He said, "Well, you know, if you do a good job as an elevator boy you could become a busboy." I said, "Oh, and then?" He said, "Well, if you do a good job as a busboy, you could become a waiter." And I said, "And is that the best job one could get?" He said, "Oh no, the best job you can get is to be the *matre d'* in the hotel."

Well, I was quite impressed with this conversation. While I thought that my wife and I were very good parents, we had never been able to provide our children with the kind of sense of mastery, purpose, and mission that this young man had. Of course, we tried to find ways to help our youngsters have successful work experiences, usually by paying for them ourselves – mow the lawn, clean the garage, clean your own room. And, of course, I was well aware that there was a great deal of poverty in that part of the world and that for all the kids that were as well put together as this elevator boy, there were many others who would be crushed by poverty and deprivation. Nonetheless,

it had not been since my own youth in the Depression that I had encountered in any young person the kind of sense of purpose, ambition, and hopefulness that I saw in that young man.

The overriding impression that one has of the problems of youth in contemporary industrial societies is their *uselessness*. My encounter with the elevator boy in Hong Kong brings to mind the words in Jeremiah 3:27, "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth". The greatest malady which many young people in our societies suffer from is the malady of being unnecessary. What is *justice* for juveniles? Primarily it is to provide them with a vision and a reality of being needed, useful, and productive in their community. Currently, in many of our societies, we cannot fulfill this sort of promise for large proportions of our youth. Many look forward to lives filled with unemployment and indolence. We attempt to keep them in school in their late adolescent and young adult years during a developmental period in which many of them want desperately to stretch their muscles, to be challenged, to achieve a sense of mastery. (The intent here is not to knock our educators; in contemporary society, educators have an impossible job to do with our teenagers.) Rather, we must extend and broaden education so that we can provide young people with opportunities to learn through work, and community and national service, as well as through academic study.

It is no wonder that we find ourselves perplexed about how to deal with status offenders for violation of curfew, smoking, running away. In adult society there is a good deal of ambivalence about adolescent offenders. On the one hand, there is much recognition of the effects of racism, lack of jobs, the absence of challenging and exciting social and physical experiences for many young people. On the other hand, there is resentment over the costs of youth-work programs, good recreational programs for adolescents. One can go from town and city to city in this country and find hordes of teenagers and young adults with nothing to do but "drag the main", hang around the shopping centres, smoke pot, or take to the road. It was J.B. Priestley who said, "Like its politicians and its wars, society has the teenagers it deserves". And, I'm sorry to say, we have the youth we deserve because we have not provided them with a vision of what they can contribute to the community.

I do not by any means mean to say that we must not continue to have programs of remediation, counselling, therapy, family counselling. These types of programs are important and necessary. They are insufficiently funded and seem barely able to keep up with even the most severe parts of the problems. And even in the best of all possible worlds we will have young people who will need resocialization and counselling, because adolescence is a difficult developmental period under the

best of conditions. But I believe it is important that scholars, administrators, and practitioners who have devoted their careers to dealing with problems of juvenile delinquency not lose sight of the need for a *societal* response, a *societal* claim, for dealing with our young people. That *societal* response must include a means by which we turn loose the energy and force of youth on work with the mentally ill, child care, the aged, ecology, in a *national* mission to enrich the lives of our youth and, indeed, everyone in our communities.

The most successful programs to deal with delinquency that we've seen over the last few decades have been those in which there has been a large well-organised, well-planned community response to the provision of programs for prevention and treatment. I refer to such programs as those mounted by the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency in the 1960's. Other examples are mobilization for Youth in New York City, Operation Push in Chicago, the Black Panthers, the Vera Project in New York City, the House of Umoja in Philadelphia run by Sister Falaka Fattah, and even the Moonies. These are all programs that attempt to provide young people with a purpose and a sense of importance that is lacking for so many of them. But what seems to be the most notable about so many of our most successful programs is that they are time-limited, and funded by voluntary bodies. There are communities which make an investment, but the investment is made for only a short period of time – 2 years, 3 years, 4 years, 5 years. There is an evaluation that shows some success. And then the programs are abandoned or not funded at their previous levels. What is needed if communities are to provide young people with the kind of purpose and mission that I've referred to is a sustained, planned response at the highest levels of government. Such a program would require the kind of political, legal, and financial support that we make to the maintenance of our legislatures, to the armed services, and to the police forces. (In fact, the armed forces is probably the single greatest program we now have for integrating many troubled and troublesome youths into adult society – though that is not its major purpose).

All this may sound rather grand, but I do not believe we can be too grand in finding ways to inspire our youth and to direct their force and energy into the service of the community. The choice may be a simple one. Will we continue to develop new generations of character disorders? Or will we invest in programs that provide high-quality child care, job and career opportunities for youth, and exciting opportunities for service to the community? Without the kind of broad and sustained societal commitment that is needed to support these kinds of programs, we cannot hope to find true justice for juveniles in our societies.