Spare the Rod, Save the Child

Missouri's youth prisons focus on small groups, therapy, caring. Officials in California's punishment-oriented system are taking a look.

By Jenifer Warren
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ST. JOSEPH, Mo.--There are no handcuffs, no razor-wire fences, no uniforms, no cells. Missouri does things differently in its prisons for young people, and it shows--in what you see and what you don't.

Inmates, referred to as "kids," live in dorms that feature beanbag chairs, potted plants, stuffed animals and bunk beds with smiley-face comforters. Guards--who are called "youth specialists" and must have college degrees--go by their first names and don't hesitate to offer hugs.

At the maximum-security lockup in St. Joseph, two cats, Midnight and Tigger, curl up on laps as the state's toughest teenage offenders explore the roots of their anger, weep over the acts of abusive parents and swap strategies for breaking free of gangs. At another facility in Kansas City, boys who rack up months of good behavior earn the right to attend summer basketball camp.

"The old corrections model was a failure; most kids left us worse off than when they came in," said Mark Steward, the chief of Missouri's youth penal system. "So we threw away that culture, and now we focus on treatment, on making connections with these guys and showing them another way....It works."

As California struggles to reshape a juvenile prison system so troubled and violent that some legislators want it closed down, Missouri--the Show Me State--is winning accolades as the national leader in handling kids who break the law.

"Missouri is the best model we have out there," said Paul DeMuro, a New Jersey-based juvenile justice consultant and former chief of youth prisons in Pennsylvania.

"It works because they believe in the 'small is beautiful' theory," agreed Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the author of a recent report on California's juvenile system. "It's about high-quality treatment in an intimate setting."

Comparing recidivism numbers is tricky, but Missouri is clearly a standout among states, Krisberg said. A 2003 study found that of the 1,400 teenagers released in 1999, only 8% wound up in adult prisons. California does not keep a comparable statistic. About half of those released from its juvenile prisons, however, will be back behind bars within two years, officials say. Missouri's system also delivers when it
comes to another important measurement: cost. It spends about $43,000 a year per child. California's per capita tab is nearly twice that—$80,000—largely because its officers are paid almost twice as much, though the cost of living in the Golden State is near the top nationally, while Missouri's is among the lowest, statistics show.

Not one young inmate has committed suicide in the two decades since Missouri altered its approach to delinquent kids. In the California Youth Authority, meanwhile, 15 have killed themselves since 1996, including two boys found hanging by bedsheets last January in the isolation cell they shared.

Drawn by the success stories, delegations of corrections officials from around the nation are visiting Missouri for a closer look. Several states, including Louisiana, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey and Illinois, have launched or are considering copycat programs.

Over the last 20 years, Missouri has replaced a traditional approach to young criminals—large, prison-like lockups with an emphasis on punishment and isolation—with small group settings that blend highly trained staff with constant therapy and positive peer pressure.

Convinced that family connections are crucial, Missouri also takes pains to house children within 50 miles of their homes. If necessary, the government sends a van to enable parents to visit.

"The Missouri system is everything the California system isn't," DeMuro said. "It's a matter of philosophy and the will to do something right and appropriate, rather than warehousing kids and creating a hotbed for gangs and more violence."

Officials in California say the pervasive presence of gangs in the state, and the fact that the CYA houses inmates as old as 25, makes the Missouri system unworkable in the Golden State. In Missouri, most inmates in juvenile prisons are younger than 18, though some are as old as 21.

"Everything I hear about Missouri tells me its programs work great for the population they have, but our demographics are very different," said Kevin Carruth, California's undersecretary of youth and adult corrections. Still, CYA Director Walt Allen plans to visit Missouri and several other states in the coming months, looking for ideas.

Krisberg, who has been advising Allen on how to address the CYA's problems, agrees that California is "different from the rest of the world, so in some ways comparisons don't make much sense." He added, however, that the essence of Missouri's system—a commitment to small programs that emphasize treatment and rehabilitation—could be imported.

Last month two dozen youth advocates, former CYA inmates and parents with kids currently locked up in California toured the Missouri system. They were so impressed by the contrast that they met with Allen and lawmakers in Sacramento, pressing them to adopt a similar approach.

"This place is like a dream," Katrina Allen, a Fresno minister whose 17-year-old son is in the CYA, said after visiting a medium-security facility in a woodsy park near Kansas City. "The whole focus is on treating kids so they can get a new start. In California, it's about trying not to get beat up and just doing time."

The Californians were particularly struck by the near absence of violence. Teenagers at one maximum-security center in Kansas City could recall only three scuffles in the last year, none serious. Asked if they worried about being jumped, they laughed. Staff assaults, too, are rare, said Steward, who could not remember any off the top of his head.

In California, meanwhile, a February report described the Youth Authority as a place permeated by fear among employees and inmates alike. At some prisons visited by a team of experts, youths attacked one another an average of 10 times a day. Officers at a CYA facility in Chino used Mace on youths four times a day during a four-month period in 2003, the report said.
California’s present looks a lot like Missouri’s past.

For almost a century, the Midwestern state housed delinquent boys in a prison-like training school with a notorious solitary-confined cell known as "the Hole."

But in 1983, after a series of scandals and reports deploring conditions at the facility, the state decided to scatter its juveniles into groups of no more than 35 each. The move reflected research showing that in large-scale settings, youths tend to get lost and that relationships with counselors and other staff—a key to rehabilitation—are more difficult to forge.

After a fitful start, Missouri gradually settled on a formula, one heavy on therapy and anchored by a complex peer culture that helps teenagers resolve day-to-day problems, confront the roots of their criminality and seek a promising life path.

The rehabilitative philosophy is reflected even in the aesthetics of the lockups. Dorm rooms overflow with homey touches—a piano and scented candle here, a fish tank and flowered shower curtain there. The correctional officers look different too. Dressed in their own clothes, Missouri’s staff members carry no Mace, no batons, no handcuffs—only walkie-talkies.

"We don't need that stuff," said Courtney Collier, the system’s regional director in Kansas City. If you do, she said, "you've got a problem."

To create such a safe environment, officials rely largely on a peer culture that engulfs youths the moment they enter a state facility. Assigned to 10-member teams with two counselors, the teenagers study, eat, sleep and exercise together. Several times a day, team members gather to "check in" with one another, a ritual that allows them to share concerns or complaints before they boil over into violence.

More talk takes place after school in group treatment rooms. There, sitting together on floor pillows, youths revisit traumatic events in their lives and look for patterns that help explain what led them astray.

One exercise designed to unearth pain from the past is the creation of a "genogram," an elaborate family tree depicting violence, drug addiction and other ills suffered by relatives. Another requires teenagers to outline their bodies on a sheet of white paper and chart the emotional and physical wounds they've suffered.

At the Northwest Regional Youth Center in Kansas City, for example, one boy’s illustration featured marks on the head to reflect brain damage associated with methamphetamine use. Elsewhere, other scribbles symbolized scars and bruises, reflecting street fights and physical and sexual abuse by a parent.

Youths say the group therapy can be wrenching for newcomers.

"Most of us come in with a fight mentality," said Eric White, 16, of Kansas City, a lanky youth who is doing time for burglary and was recently named student of the month at the Northwest Center. "But pretty soon you see there's no reason for that here."

Occasionally, youths do fight—especially the newly arrived. When that happens, Missouri permits the juveniles, assisted by a staff member, to use a controversial tactic known as a "restraint"—wrestling the aggressor to the ground and holding fast until the youth calms down.

Some juvenile justice experts say offenders should not be permitted to lay hands on each other. Steward said it works here because of the intimate "team culture." There have been no injuries or lawsuits over the restraints, he said, adding that they rarely occur.

Jerry Riley, 17, has never been restrained. But he arrived in the Missouri system with a defiant attitude and a long string of crimes under his belt. Initially, the youth said, he figured he could "fake the program,"
do my own thing." But as the months passed, his anger subsided and he spotted an opportunity.

"Basically, this place allowed me the chance to be a child," said Riley, a garrulous teenager with broad shoulders and a wide grin. "My mom had five kids, she was living check to check, so I was always an adult, taking care of myself. I was always fighting, selling drugs, shooting at people, getting shot at--and I thought that was regular."

A year ago, he was arrested for selling crack cocaine and sent to the Northwest Center. "I'm glad I got caught," he said, "because I was on my way to doing bigger and bigger things."

After months of exemplary behavior, Riley has earned top privileges, including daily phone calls, regular outings into the community and a week of basketball camp. He is so trusted by staff that he recently led the California visitors on a tour of the Northwest facility, dressed in a blue polo shirt and slacks. Like any good tour guide, he checked the clock frequently to make sure he stayed on schedule.

Riley, who is weeks away from discharge and plans to attend college in the fall, will have a lot of help when he goes home, because intensive after-care is another uncommon hallmark of Missouri's approach.

From their first day in the state system to their last, youths are teamed with a single counselor, who develops a treatment plan tailored to their needs. Once out, a youth is assigned a second adult known as a "tracker," who acts somewhat like a big brother and meets with the parolee every few days to ensure he is staying straight.

Steward calls kids like Riley his goodwill ambassadors, and uses them to sell the story of Missouri's program in the Legislature and beyond. So far, political support has been steady and bipartisan. One big fan was the late Gov. Mel Carnahan, a Democrat, who was so taken with the program that he used to play host to a handful of boys in his statehouse office a few times a year. Another backer is conservative state Supreme Court Judge Stephen Limbaugh, cousin of radio commentator Rush Limbaugh.

Supporters say that beyond the recidivism numbers, they are captivated by the stories of lives turned around. One who embodies that transformation is Brian Laoruangroch, an ex-offender who was recently elected student body president at the University of Missouri.

Earlier this year, he called his former counselor and volunteered to help promote the program. Steward wasted no time: "I said, 'See what he's doing next Tuesday,' and I brought him with us down to the House for our budget hearing."

Dressed sharply in suit and tie, the student leader recounted his lifelong struggle with drugs and other troubles, and explained the metamorphosis that took place inside Missouri's juvenile system. The legislators were smitten. Despite a budget deficit and cuts to agencies across state government, they left the youth corrections budget largely intact.

Steward said he believes that his state's success can be replicated in California, despite the different mix of offenders. Older inmates, he said, have a maturity level that helps them "get" the program faster than younger kids. And Missouri's experience with youths from tough St. Louis gangs shows that such street ties are eroded by the strong peer bonds kids develop inside.

Krisberg, the president of the national council on delinquency, said the mission statement of the CYA would lead you to believe that it was "supposed to be doing the same thing they do in Missouri. But somewhere along the way, California went off track."

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