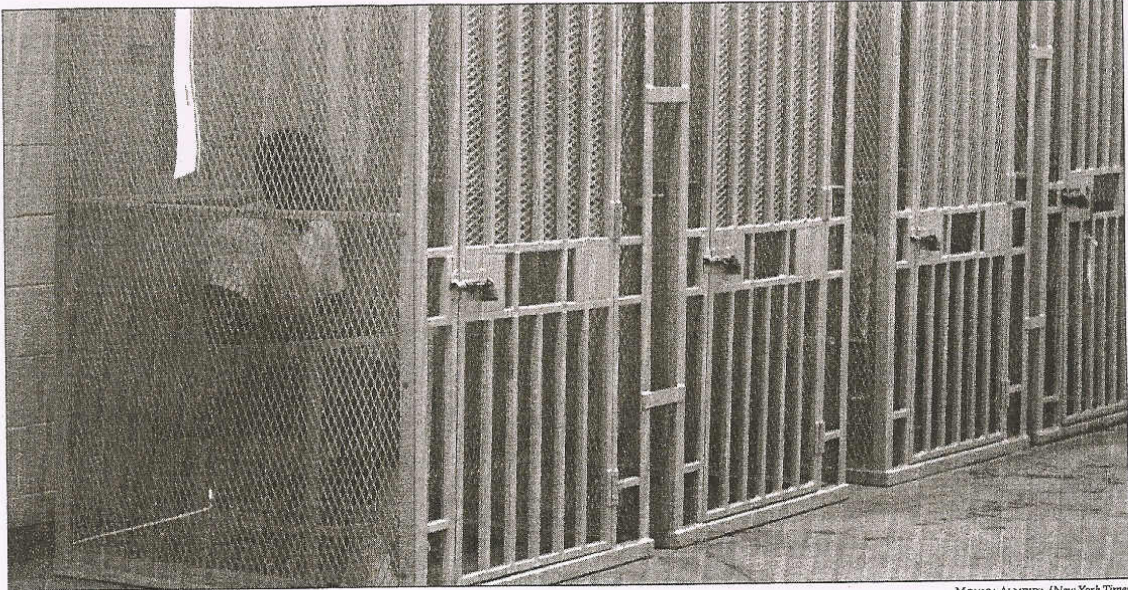


OPEN FORUM | Youth Behind Bars



MONICA ALMEIDA / New York Times

Restraining device: Juveniles who cause trouble at the Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility in Whittier (Los Angeles County) are confined to cages when receiving instruction or counseling.

Let's rehabilitate kids, not punish them

By Jeff Adachi

Last week, during state Senate hearings on California's youth correctional system, Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, proposed a radical idea: the complete dismantling and elimination of the California Youth Authority. Prompted by a lawsuit filed by the Prison Law Office, juvenile justice experts appointed by the state attorney general who investigated conditions at the CYA found that the 4,600 youth incarcerated in its 11 facilities are not being rehabilitated, as mandated by law, but are being punished.

The experts' reports detailed an atmosphere of "intense fear and violence"; daily incidents of gang savagery; denial of basic psychiatric, medical and drug treatment; lack of educational programs; and the use of iron cages, Mace and 23-hour-a-day lockdowns to discipline youth.

How could an agency that is supposed to enhance, educate and reform children have gone so wrong?

California's juvenile justice system was first established in 1859, when the Legislature created the San Francisco Industrial School. As the population of incarcerated youth increased, more facilities were built and the Legislature eventually ordered the courts to stop sending juvenile offenders to adult prisons. In 1941, the CYA was formed and given statewide jurisdiction over juvenile detainees and parolees. In the late 1960s, director Allen Breed instituted wide reforms and established rehabilitative programs at the CYA.

But the CYA eventually became the victim of politics. As crime increased, politicians began making piecemeal changes to juvenile justice legislation, which eliminated many of the delinquency-prevention programs. Funding cuts drastically curtailed the agency's programs, resulting in fewer caseworkers, psychologists and teachers, and facilities became overcrowded. As adult cor-

rections became a more significant part of the state's budget, the emphasis was changed to incarcerating, rather than rehabilitating youth. Gov. Pete Wilson's "Tough on Juvenile Crime" initiative — Proposition 21 — signaled that the state's top official favored punishment of juveniles over rehabilitation; Gov. Gray Davis' administration continued Wilson's mandate.

Adding to the CYA's difficulties is the fact that its leadership has lacked continuity and stability. The director of the CYA is a political appointee of the governor and is subject to removal with each administration. In the past 20 years, the

CYA has had more than 10 directors, some of whom had little experience working with youth. The result is an agency, in the words of Inspector General Steve White, that suffers from "a woeful lack of leadership," and "organizational schizophrenia."

But behind the policy failures are the juveniles who are serving time and their families. The reality is that every youth committed to the CYA, regardless of his or her crime, will one day be released to the community, as youth are held only until they reach the age of 25. When released, they return home with few skills and, predictably, more than 40 percent commit crimes again.

Yet, if given proper opportunities and guidance, 95 percent of youth offenders can be rehabilitated. According to Katherine Larson, who has more than two decades of experience working in youth corrections systems, youth require one-on-one attention, positive discipline, empathic staff strategies and mentoring, followed by intensive supervision when they are released on parole. They also

need culturally sensitive literacy training, academics, substance abuse and vocational training and family involvement and support.

Some years ago, Larson conducted two extensive federally funded studies on the CYA. She took a group of 15 "incorrigibles," selected by the CYA, provided them with social cognitive training, and compared their recidivism rates to a control group who did not receive the training. The results were stunning: Recidivism was reduced by 60 percent and violent crime by more than two-thirds. Youths who received the training were also seven times more productive than

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those who did not, meaning that they successfully held jobs and completed educational tasks. Larson, who spent years unsuccessfully trying to convince the CYA administrators to adopt these strategies, finally quit, calling it "the most frustrating professional experience I have ever had."

Indeed, despite dozens of studies on

how the CYA can correct its operations, the organization has not improved over the past 20 years. Each new director has promised change but not delivered. Walter White III, appointed last December by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, has also pledged to reform the CYA, agreeing to begin phasing out his staff's use of iron cages to house youth. While leadership is essential, however, the problem is much bigger than any one person.

At last week's hearings, the legislative analyst said that the CYA should be eliminated, because CYA commitments have dropped from 10,000 in the late 1990s to less than half that amount. According to the analyst, the decrease was caused by a drop in juvenile crime, along with a Senate bill requiring counties to pay the part of the state's commitment costs — estimated at \$80,000 per youth — that discouraged counties from sending youth to the CYA.

In San Francisco, where alternative placement programs are emphasized, only three of the 1,500 youth represented by the public defender last year were committed to the CYA. With Alameda, San Mateo, Santa Clara, San Joaquin and San Francisco counties presently calling for a moratorium on CYA commitments because of this latest report, it is likely that the CYA population will shrink even further.

But if the CYA is dismantled, what will happen to the youths it houses? The legislative analyst proposed using the agency's \$450 million budget to provide subsidies to counties that run successful local programs. In San Francisco, this would mean more funding for programs such as the Log Cabin ranch, a city-owned facility in Woodside that can house up to 130 youth, but now houses only 20 because of lack of funding. Many counties have already developed successful programs that focus on preventive strategies and youth development, such as Santa Cruz's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative program, which uses soccer to teach gang members how to get along and has its own culinary arts academy. The money would be better spent on programs such as these, which educate youths instead of locking them in iron cages.

However, the question remains whether the Legislature has the political will to change an agency that has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to rehabilitate juveniles. Many hope that the tragic suicide of the two youths found hanging in their cells in the CYA's Preston facility in February will serve as a wake-up call. As the mother of the one of the deceased youths told lawmakers, "I'm praying that you do what you say you're going to do."

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