

Journal of Adolescent Research

<http://jar.sagepub.com>

Lessons From a Juvenile Training School: Survival and Growth

Michelle Inderbitzin

Journal of Adolescent Research 2006; 21; 7

DOI: 10.1177/0743558405283042

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/21/1/7>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Adolescent Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jar.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 7 articles hosted on the
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):

<http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/21/1/7>

Lessons From a Juvenile Training School: Survival and Growth

Michelle Inderbitzin
Oregon State University

This article examines the lessons learned by youths confined to a maximum-security juvenile correctional facility. Using data from an ethnographic study of a cottage of violent offenders in one state's end-of-the-line training school, the author describes the lessons the institution and its staff members hoped to teach the young people in their care and the informal but vital lessons the inmates indicated they had learned during their incarceration. The continued viability of training schools as a response to serious and violent juvenile offenders is analyzed and discussed.

Keywords: training school; juvenile offender; imprisonment; ethnography; juvenile justice

There are those who believe that the idea of a separate justice system for juveniles, after more than a century in existence, has outgrown its usefulness. They argue that as long as young offenders commit serious crimes, they should be prepared to face the consequences; indeed, it seems that "recent reforms in juvenile justice have placed the notion of youth itself on trial" (Grisso & Schwartz, 2000, p. 5). In spite of such arguments, however, the juvenile justice system continues its mission, and those who speak on its behalf espouse the ideals of rehabilitation and the malleability of youth.

The central question in this article concerns the function and utility of juvenile training schools as institutions of social control and as agents of change for adolescent inmates. More specifically, I examine one such institution in light of the rhetoric surrounding reform schools and the reality of daily life within the institution's walls and then evaluate its effectiveness based on the lessons learned by young offenders who serve a portion of their adolescence there. After spending a significant percentage of their lives confined to a juvenile correctional facility, what do young offenders think they have learned? What will they take away from their time in the institution? How will they have changed?

Journal of Adolescent Research, Vol. 21 No. 1, January 2006 7-26
DOI: 10.1177/0743558405283042
© 2006 Sage Publications

More than two decades ago, apparently the best that could be said for juvenile institutions was that "at least some training schools do not have as damaging an effect on juveniles as do prisons" (Haskell & Yablonsky, 1982, p. 446). In the 1970s, Massachusetts, under the helm of Jerome Miller, took a bold step and attempted to deinstitutionalize virtually all of the juvenile offenders in the state. At that time, reform schools ("an old-fashioned but honest name," according to Miller, 1998, p. xvii) were thought to do more harm than good, and Miller managed to close down all such institutions and replace them with alternative programs and placements in the community. Proponents of deinstitutionalization argued that the negative lessons learned and the stigma associated with incarceration far outweighed any benefit for individuals in the system (Miller, 1998). In addition, studies from that era report conditions in state training schools that today would certainly be viewed as unacceptable: Cottage "parents" frequently used physical means to punish the boys in their care—striking, shaking, and shoving them (Weber, 1961); boys were housed in the "tombs," an extreme form of isolation and were not allowed to speak while in their cottage living unit (Feld, 1999; Miller, 1998); and younger and weaker boys were regularly victimized by their tougher counterparts (Bartollas, Miller, & Dinitz, 1976; Feld, 1977; Polsky, 1962).

During the past two decades, the United States has made a clear movement to get tough on juvenile crime, and the sentencing of juvenile offenders has become increasingly punitive (Feld, 1999). As such, the categories of comparison have drastically changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, when compared to deinstitutionalization and community alternatives, juvenile correctional facilities were often viewed as the strictest of punishments for juvenile offenders—the last resort for the state's most incorrigible youth. These days, the possibilities for punishment have shifted to the point that reform schools now seem to be the kinder, gentler option—the two alternatives facing serious juvenile offenders are now generally confinement in juvenile correctional facilities or confinement in adult prisons.

The past two decades have also witnessed a relative dearth of ethnographic studies on training schools. The heyday of studies of the inmate culture and the inner workings of training schools seemed to be in the 1960s and 1970s (Bartollas et al., 1976; Feld, 1977; Polsky, 1962; Weber, 1961; Wooden, 1976). In fact, some researchers have suggested that interest in the conditions of training schools in the United States has fallen to such a degree that it is hard to make meaningful comparisons (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004, p. 224). The findings from the earlier works were overwhelmingly negative, and the authors painted dark pictures of juvenile institutions. Feld (1998), in reviewing the evidence some 20 years after his own sociological

study of state training schools, concludes: "Evaluations of training schools, the most common form of institutional treatment for the largest numbers of serious and chronic delinquents, report consistently negative findings They constitute the one extensively evaluated and clearly ineffective method to treat delinquents" (Feld, 1998, p. 237).

Bortner and Williams (1997) conducted one of the more recent, in-depth studies of a model program operating in two juvenile prisons. The model program they describe was created in response to a class-action lawsuit against Arizona's system of juvenile corrections. In much the same way earlier research condemned practices in state training schools as damaging to young inmates, the lawsuit suggested that Arizona's juvenile correctional facilities were punitive, coercive, and inhumane (Bortner & Williams, 1997, p. x). The model treatment program sought to provide youths the skills necessary to succeed in society, emphasizing accountability, responsibility, mutual respect, and personal efficacy. It offered a new goal and vision for society's treatment of delinquent youth. The innovative program was never fully implemented and ultimately came to be viewed as a failure. Although the changes did not last, Arizona's experiment with new programming in juvenile correctional facilities provides at least one example of thinking outside of the prison box in treating young offenders.

Interestingly, some recent studies (Forst, Fagan, & Vivona, 1989; Lane, Lanza-Kaduce, Frazier, & Bishop, 2002) suggest that the juvenile offenders themselves found their time in the "deep end" of juvenile corrections to be their most helpful or productive placement. Lane et al. (2002) describe deep end juvenile programs as residential commitment facilities that are the most restrictive in the state, with more physical security, closer supervision, and longer periods of confinement than other programs and facilities (p. 433). In interviews, the youths cited a combination of available programming, caring staff members, and smaller populations as making their time in juvenile correctional facilities a better experience in their perception than the more punitive jails and prisons where they were incarcerated alongside generally older, stronger, more criminal adults. In addition, sanctions earlier in the more "shallow end" of the juvenile system, including probation, day programs, and short-term placements in low-risk, least restrictive residential programs, proved to have little effect on the young offenders; the shorter sentences did not give them enough time away from their lives to become fully immersed in the programming.

Developmental psychologists argue that:

adolescence in modern society is an inherently transitional time during which there are rapid and dramatic changes in physical, intellectual, emotional, and

social capabilities . . . other than infancy, there is probably no period of human development characterized by more rapid or pervasive transformations in individual competencies. (Steinberg & Schwartz, 2000, p. 23)

Because they work primarily with adolescents, juvenile justice agencies have the potential to exert enormous influence over the rapidly changing lives of their captive populations. As such, it seems we should pay particular attention to the treatment of adolescent offenders.

Although little research is being conducted inside training schools and juvenile institutions, there is now a great deal of attention being paid to issues of prisoner reentry (Altschuler & Brash, 2004) as increasing numbers of inmates are released from correctional facilities to return to their communities. This is an especially interesting dilemma for juvenile offenders who are literally becoming men behind bars; most will leave the juvenile prisons and training schools where they served their sentences as legal adults with virtually no safety nets in place (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Arnett (1998) makes the point that "the transition to adulthood is characterized not by a single event but by an extended process of preparation for the challenges and responsibilities of adult life" (p. 311). Young Americans identify three main criteria for the transition to adulthood: accepting responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (p. 295). One question of interest is whether this transition to adulthood is stunted or accelerated by incarceration in a juvenile correctional facility. Because many young offenders were largely living on their own and supporting themselves while still teenagers in the community, I would argue that the transition to adulthood was accelerated for them prior to their confinement. During their incarceration, however, when adolescent inmates' responsibilities and ability to make decisions are severely limited, the transition to adulthood is likely stunted.

For most American young people, "Emerging adulthood is a time of looking forward and imagining what adult life will be like, and what emerging adults imagine is generally bright and promising Whatever the future may actually hold, during emerging adulthood, hope prevails" (Arnett, 2004, p. 206). This point brings up a second question of particular interest for adolescent inmates: Does hope manage to prevail for a particularly troubled population of emerging adults, incarcerated young men, most of whom are minority males who grew up poor, living with troubled families in disadvantaged neighborhoods? Going inside juvenile institutions and listening to the young inmates as they pass through different stages of their confinement is an important step in answering such questions.

Evaluating the current state of juvenile justice, Van Vleet (1999) argued that “get-tough measures . . . have returned much of the youth corrections system to the training school mentality that was largely abandoned during the decades of deinstitutionalization” (p. 204). He goes on to describe incarceration in a juvenile correctional facility as “punishment with treatment components added on” (pp. 209-210). The availability of and the quality of treatment components is one important difference between juvenile and adult institutions; given their younger, developing populations, juvenile correctional facilities tend to be more focused on rehabilitation than are adult prisons (Altschuler & Brash, 2004) and are better able to utilize approaches grounded in developmental knowledge (Scott, 2000).

In the current study, I sought to find out—from the ground level—what is happening in juvenile correctional facilities, to discover how serious juvenile offenders experience incarceration in a state training school. To do so, I focused on the following questions: What lessons does the institution attempt to teach its population of adolescents and emerging adults? What lessons are the inmates actually learning? What, ultimately, will these young offenders take with them back into the community? Are training schools still a viable response for violent juvenile offenders?

METHOD

The training school in this study houses the state’s most serious problem children still held under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. The population of chronic and violent male offenders in this juvenile prison ranges in age from 15 to 20. Most of them have done time and served sentences in other juvenile institutions, and this facility was often their last stop in the juvenile system. If they committed further crimes, they would face adult consequences.

The maximum-security institution in this study is very much a juvenile prison. As Bortner and Williams (1997) point out in their own study of a juvenile prison in Arizona: “The special language of juvenile justice denies the realities of prison conditions It is impossible to ignore the level of control, the razor wire, electronic gates, and the harsh and punitive nature of these institutions, historically and currently” (pp. xvi-xvii). Likewise, the institution in this study has a razor wire fence surrounding the perimeter, a full-time security staff, and locked rooms within locked living units. At the time of this study, there were about 200 boys sentenced to this training school. Based on his offense type, each was assigned to a cottage living unit

that would be his home during his incarceration. The boys would attend school, work in the institution, go to recreation at the gym, and eat their meals in the institution's cafeteria, but each night they would return to their cottage. In attempting to see long-term interactions and deeper layers of meaning, I chose to focus on the "Blue" cottage, a cottage housing a population of 18 to 26 violent offenders at any given time and widely regarded as home to the toughest offenders in the toughest training school in the state.

The ethnographic data for this study were gathered through observations during a period of approximately 15 months. During the course of the study, I averaged approximately one visit per week, generally staying for 7 or 8 hours at a time. I often chose to visit and observe on Saturdays and afternoons or evenings when the boys would be out of school and spending time in the cottage. Most of the time, I simply hung out in the cottage, watching, listening, and interacting with the *residents* (the school's preferred term for its inmates) and the staff members.

In response to the boys' initial cynicism about talking to an outsider, I chose not to do formal interviews, preferring instead to gather information through less intrusive means—conversing informally, listening to the residents and the staff members, asking questions, and paying attention to the interactions in the cottage. In my role as a researcher, I went from being an outsider to being a welcome diversion; within a few months, many of the boys looked forward to my visits as they helped to break the monotony of their daily lives. This gave me an opportunity to have ongoing discussions with the boys and the staff members; I was able to ask the same question in different ways and at various times, and I was able to follow up questions and conversations weeks and months later as circumstances changed and the boys went through different phases of their sentences. After each visit, I took extensive field notes detailing events, conversations, and my own thoughts; the field notes were then the data for analysis.

This case study of a single cottage of violent offenders may not have been representative of the larger institution, let alone representative of juvenile corrections more generally. Yet, the body of research on training schools—and, to some extent, adult prisons—largely fit the reality of life in this cottage. It rang true enough that I came away convinced that inmate cultures share at least some universal issues. The present study is offered, then, as a supplement to the classic pieces on prison culture (Goffman, 1961; Irwin, 1970; Sykes, 1958) and as a glimpse into life inside a modern day training school. Ultimately, I wanted to find out how serious young offenders experienced punishment in the state's end-of-the-line juvenile institution. This article is one part of the answer; it is a recounting of lessons I learned in spending time attempting to delve beneath the rhetoric while witnessing the patterns of

daily life in the Blue cottage. To protect the identity of young men who hope to have better futures, all names have been changed.

RESULTS

One of the primary goals of this study was to understand the effect of time inside the institution on the individuals, to closely examine the experiences, the adaptations, and the survival strategies of residents in the Blue cottage. The focus of this article is on the lessons that the boys learned during their incarceration. Some of the lessons were abstract, some were concrete, some physical, some mental. Some the institution tried to teach, others were the inescapable result of the experience of incarceration. I will begin by discussing the pains of imprisonment and how the young offenders learned to deal with them. I will then move to lessons in conformity the institution intended, informal lessons learned from cottage staff members and other inmates, lessons learned in relation to family and friends, and lessons learned over time. Finally, I will discuss the lessons that the broader society can learn about training schools and their effect on young offenders.

Learning to Deal With the Pains of Imprisonment

The first lesson all of the boys had to learn is one with which inmates have been dealing for generations: learning to survive the daily frustrations and challenges inherent in the structure of the institution. A defining aspect of the residents' lives in the juvenile prison was their indignation over losing liberties, what Sykes (1958) calls "pains of imprisonment." TJ, a 20-year-old African American, expressed how much he hated doing time in the institution and how the loss of liberty grated on him. He explained that he hated the fact that he had to pound on his locked door to get out to go to the bathroom, how everyone else controls your life when you are locked up. His feelings fit perfectly with Sykes and Messinger's (1960) discussion of the deprivation of autonomy:

Rejected, impoverished, and figuratively castrated, the prisoner must face still further indignity in the extensive social control exercised by the custodians. The many details of the inmate's life, ranging from the hours of sleeping to the route to work and the job itself, are subject to a vast number of regulations made by prison officials. The inmate is stripped of his autonomy; hence, to the other pains of imprisonment we must add the pressure to define himself as weak, helpless, and dependent. (Sykes & Messinger, 1960, pp. 14-15)

The young inmates had to ask permission to shave, to shower, to make phone calls, to get paper and a pencil, to send letters. In discussing the deprivation of liberty, Sykes (1958) makes the point that treating inmates like helpless children poses a severe threat to their self-image. This becomes an interesting question when dealing with juvenile inmates who have never experienced full acceptance into the adult world. The oldest inmates—those who had reached the age of 19 or 20—felt the threat most acutely, but many of the boys in the cottage had basically been independent and on their own for some time before being incarcerated, so the restrictions still stung. It may be that when dealing with a population of juvenile offenders, the deprivation of autonomy is less severe than it is for adults, but such treatment may pose more damage in the long term to self-concepts that are not yet fully formed.

In addition to the loss of many small privileges and most of their autonomy, the residents also chafed at the loss of privacy. Because few of them were assigned to rooms by themselves, they often had to deal with irritating roommates. I heard many complaints about roommates—some were told to me in conversation, others were taken to the staff in the hopes of changing the situation. Sometimes the issue was about race or age—African American residents did not want to room with White residents; older residents did not want to room with immature boys (although by state law, children younger than 18 could not be placed in a room with those older than 18). The complaints of the residents were wide ranging: Some were disgusted by the “funky” smells generated by their roommates, and at least one unpopular roommate was known for wetting his bed. Others complained about having to “play counselor” for their roommates and having to listen to their problems at all hours. And some roommates, they said, were just plain annoying—talking all the time or asking too many questions. The real issue, it seemed, was the lack of privacy.

As Sykes (1958) points out in discussing the pains of imprisonment and particularly the deprivation of goods and services: “There are admittedly many problems in attempting to compare the standard of living existing in the free community and the standard of living which is supposed to be the lot of the inmate in prison” (p. 67). Although times have changed enough that these inmates did not have to go through all of the degradation and mortification ceremonies that Sykes (1958) and Goffman (1961) describe, they were, on their entrance, stripped of most of their own possessions and given state-issue replacements of basic necessities.

The boys frequently expressed their annoyance at having to live with what they deemed inferior products. When Tony, a 20-year-old Latino, was about to be transferred out of the institution to a group home, one small privilege

that he was excited about was the opportunity he would have to choose and to purchase nice soap. The residents were even skeptical about some of the treats that the institution provided. For example, cottages often ordered pizzas from a local restaurant on Friday nights. Tony said that the pizza was often "skunky;" he believed that the restaurant, knowing that the institution would likely order pizza on Fridays, probably saved all of their old, unused crusts for the institution's order. Although he had no proof that the restaurant did this, his belief was strong. The residents' complaints about the quality of the products provided by the institution generally fell on deaf ears.

The food at the institution was described by both staff members and residents as "all starch," filling but also fattening and not as healthy as it could be. The Latino boys particularly complained that the food was bland and never had enough spices, seeming to agree with Sykes' (1958) point that "a standard of living can be hopelessly inadequate, from the individual's perspective, because it bores him to death" (p. 68). Even the staff regularly made fun of the food, one of them warning me not to eat there unless I was "starving to death." Perhaps because the food offered subsistence and little else, the boys often begged staff members to give them their desserts or to share with them whatever snacks or treats they might have brought in from the outside. Individuals would ask the staff members who served as their counselors to bring them in something "eatable" for their birthdays, graduations, or other special occasions. When they were lucky enough to get candy or food from their families, the boys were often generous in sharing their stashes with friends and others in the cottage.

Along with different and better food, the residents were very eager for something, anything different to do to relieve the monotony of their days and nights in the institution. They would often try to convince the staff to rent movies or video games for them. One night, I witnessed an interaction where a resident, Alex, and the cottage supervisor played a game of pool with the stakes being that the supervisor would rent Alex a video game if he won. With such motivation, Alex played a great game of pool, and the supervisor was compelled to rent him a game during the next week. The boys were also eager for magazines, catalogues, or different books to read, particularly because, as one young man expressed to me, "The library here doesn't have shit." On occasions when I would bring my laptop computer to the cottage, the boys would beg me to bring it out and then would line up to play card games or checkers on the computer and would stand back and offer advice to the person currently playing. They always treated the computer with the utmost respect, encouraging me to bring it in on my next visit.

Lessons the Institution Intended: School, Life Skills, Work

Among the lessons that the institution hoped to transmit to its residents were basic life skills and conforming attitudes. Boys younger than 18 were required to attend school in the institution, working toward the completion of their high school diploma or a GED. Most of the inmates of the training school were severely behind academically; their time inside essentially forced them to at least go through the motions of attending school. Once they earned a diploma or GED, their opportunities for formal education essentially ended. The only way that a motivated student could take college courses was if he or his family could afford to finance correspondence or distance learning courses. For most of the boys in this study, this was not a realistic possibility. Although they could not further their education while in the institution, the cottage staff members did encourage young men who would be getting out soon to consider attending community college. They spent a good deal of time with interested individuals showing them how to fill out applications for financial aid, advising them on courses, and helping them get their paperwork in order.

As part of their programming, each cottage was responsible for conducting classes on topics such as life skills, anger-management, victim empathy, and cultural literacy. Although they had virtually no training to do so, cottage staff members were expected to lead the classes and attempt to impart knowledge the young men would need when returning to the community. The institution provided photocopied notebooks of ideas for lessons, but the quality of the classes varied widely, largely dependent on the skill, commitment, and creativity of the staff member in charge. The connection of some of the materials to the reality of the boys' lives was highly questionable.

Several meetings were centered around videotaped programs: The drug and alcohol group viewed a fairly generic video on a White female's addiction, and the cultural literacy group was shown a tabloid-style video that advanced a conspiracy theory about the death of Jesus. The staff member in charge gave an awkward introduction to the video, saying, "Don't get mad; it's just a viewpoint. Be open-minded," but he failed to make it relevant to the topic of the class or the boys' lives.

The life skills class was a better example of tailoring the curriculum to the population. In it, the staff member, Luke, led frank discussions about sex and birth control and about paying bills and managing money. He tried to teach the residents how to plan their finances and arranged for them each to have a "checking account" for the money in their institutional accounts. It turned out

to be more challenging than the staff had predicted, however, because the boys kept lending each other checks and messing up their accounts.

Along with a high school education and the competencies learned in their treatment groups, the boys also learned basic work skills and what would be expected of them as employees. Nearly all of the boys performed some sort of work in the institution. Some worked in the kitchen, some in the laundry, some in maintenance. Two jobs that were particularly sought after were helping out the staff in the gym for recreation and driving staff members and guests around the campus in a small golf cart or tram. All of the jobs paid the same minimal amount (\$1 an hour at the end of the study), but the work itself was considered an important part of the learning experience for inmates. It taught them characteristics that would be expected in a job in the community: to show up on time, to perform their assigned duties, and to cooperate with authority figures.

Lessons Learned From Cottage Staff Members

In their daily interactions with the juvenile offenders, the Blue cottage staff members strove to model prosocial behaviors in the hopes that the boys would learn conforming attitudes and behaviors. They hoped to offer them a glimpse of another set of values, another lifestyle they could choose. In addition, they worked to be consistent in their dealings with the young men in the cottage so that none of the individuals would feel singled out for unjust treatment.

The boys learned about consequences both big and small during their time in the cottage and the larger institution. They saw the long-term consequences of their crimes as the days of their confinement added up to months and years. They learned about short-term consequences for their behavior in their dealings with the cottage staff who sanctioned them for their bad behavior and rewarded them for positive steps. For many of the boys, it was the first time they had ever been so closely monitored and held accountable for their actions. It was often the first time an adult had taken a real interest in what they were doing and what they were thinking.

Although they did the best they could with limited resources and difficult circumstances, staff members feared their intervention might come too late for many of the young men in the cottage. For example, one night after spending nearly 2 hours individually counseling a boy named Andre, a staff member, Luke, told me that he wished he could do a lot more to give these kids a chance. He explained that Andre "did not get much socialization" from his mother; he remembered sleeping on the yard as a very small child, waiting for

his mother to come home. Luke said that when he asked Andre how he will raise his own children, "he knew how it should be" and he spoke of how he would "consequent" his own children to teach them responsibility for their actions. Although Andre knew how things "should" be, he never really learned how to behave himself. Luke said that Andre understood all of this, but he was learning to behave while incarcerated, which Luke believed was "fucked up." As Andre's counselor, Luke put a great deal of time and effort into trying to help him and teach him before he returned to the community.

Along with the prosocial skills that were modeled, the boys learned other skills from the staff members who essentially served as their surrogate parents, coaches, big brothers, and counselors during their time in the cottage. Staff members taught them to play chess and cribbage, showed them how to improve their athletic skills, and encouraged them in their artistic endeavors. They spent a lot of time talking to the boys about their friends and their families, helping them to make concrete plans for their return to the community.

Two examples illustrate the range of the lessons imparted by the cottage staff. In the first, a young man was involved in an assault within the institution. With new criminal charges being filed, he could no longer stay in the juvenile justice system, and he was to be transferred to an adult institution. Before his transfer, the cottage supervisor went over to the lockdown unit where he was being temporarily held to spend some time talking to him, advising him "how not to get killed in prison." On an entirely different level, cottage staff members were reminded of the youth of some of their charges as they watched them grow, their bodies filling out and maturing during their incarceration. Without family members around to guide them into manhood, many of the boys sought help and advice from the more trusted staff members. Such guidance was poignantly illustrated when I witnessed Luke patiently teach a young man how to shave his face for the first time.

Lessons Learned From Other Inmates

At least as important as the lessons learned from the staff members and from the programming provided by the institution were the lessons the young offenders learned from their fellow inmates. Peer pressure and one's peer group standing are at least as important for institutionalized juveniles as they are for children in other populations (Preveaux, Ray, LoBello, & Mehta, 2004); in fact, the influence of peers is likely magnified in a total institution (Goffman, 1961) where your peers are your only public.

One of the first things new boys learned was to keep their mouths shut until they had proven themselves to the other members of the Blue cottage. This was clearly illustrated at dinner one night when I sat with a group of

boys, and they told me that a particularly quiet individual was “too young to have any say yet” and he had to “sit and take it and be quiet.” The boys who had “big mouths” and did not learn this quickly enough found that there was often a physical price to be paid as tougher inmates with longer tenure in the cottage taught them a lesson they would not soon forget. There were several instances throughout this study where I would notice fresh bruises or black eyes on one of the inmates, and I was told that individual had been “taken down a notch.” The consensus in the cottage was generally that the boy had deserved the beating he got, if not more.

Along with learning how and when to keep their mouths shut, the boys in the cottage also had to learn to get along with others. They were virtually never alone, and so they had to find a way to compromise and to live in relative peace. They learned to be a little more tolerant. Rival gang members had to share the same space in the Blue cottage and learn to put their vendettas on hold. They learned who, if anyone, to trust.

The institution did have some elements of the “crime school” that correctional facilities are feared to be. The young inmates grew tougher as they grew older, and some became more criminally sophisticated; they spent a great deal of their time and energy trying to think of ways to be better criminals. Many of the boys in Blue had a history of selling drugs, and they thought if they were smarter in their actions and slow to turn to violence, they could return successfully to the drug market to make their money. Those individuals were quick to point out that they had not been caught and punished for selling drugs; most were in the institution for robbery or assault or some other act of violence.

As one example, Marco, a 19-year-old Latino, was incarcerated for being the “trigger man” on a drive-by shooting. As he neared the end of his sentence, Marco vowed that he was finished with gang violence, telling me: “I’m not putting in anymore work, though . . . no more drive-bys.” He did intend to sell drugs when he was back in the community, but he had thought carefully about how to reduce the risk. He said that he would not take a lot of risks and would not be a visible dealer out on the street corner. Instead, he planned to make his deals with a pager; with a pager, he said, “you know who is calling you, and you can arrange to meet in a safe place.” He also said that he would not carry the drugs in plastic baggies, because “baggies are used to prove intent to sell/deliver,” which would carry a longer, more severe sentence.

In addition to thinking about ways to earn money while staying out of prison, Marco spent some of his time in the institution trying to figure out ways to beat the system; although he enjoyed writing for the training school’s student newspaper, he also went to considerable effort forging a GED certificate. It was clear that he was smart and skilled enough to earn his GED legiti-

mately, but he chose instead to try to forge it. Although it was a very good effort, the forgery was ultimately detected.

The residents of Blue also learned lessons from their day-to-day interactions. They learned to negotiate with each other and with staff members for small privileges. They learned how to fight verbal battles and to take or deflect teasing when it was aimed at them. In their attempts to stave off boredom, they improved their skills at video games, card games, pool, cribbage, and chess. After being soundly beaten at the cottage's two video games, one of the boys called Alex a "video game addict." Alex responded simply: "What else is there to do but play video games and watch TV?" A few of the boys exercised their creativity by writing poetry and raps and drawing pictures. Some took on leadership roles and learned how to teach their own hard-won conforming skills to others. Ultimately, from each other, the inmates learned how to survive their time in the institution.

Lessons Learned in Relation to Family and Friends

An important and sometimes painful lesson for the young men in this study was learning how to manage long distance relationships with friends and families, including their own children. Throughout their sentences, they learned who would be there for them and what loyalty really means in tough times. In combating their loneliness and frustration, it was important for the residents to feel that their friends in the community remembered them and cared what happened to them. A couple of the boys expressed their contempt for fair-weather friends. They made the point that people who they had not heard from the whole time they were locked up suddenly started calling them again as they were about to get out. They said that they were suddenly acting like their best friends, acting like nothing had changed after basically ignoring them for most of the time they were incarcerated. The residents prized loyalty and no longer valued such inconsistent friends.

In maintaining relationships throughout their sentences, the telephone and the mail served as important lifelines for the residents (Sykes, 1958). Phone calls and visits provided the boys a chance to keep in contact with the outside world. Yet, even that contact was severely restricted as mail was scanned and sometimes censored by staff members as they checked it both coming in and going out of the institution. Letters with gang references or veiled threats were confiscated. The number of telephone calls made by each of the boys was also carefully monitored and regulated by cottage staff members. Although there was more flexibility with incoming calls, the institution was far from most of their hometowns, and the boys' long distance calls out were generally limited to 5 minutes.

The phone and the mail were particularly important for communicating with girls. Many of the boys had met their current girlfriends while locked up. Friends shared their pictures of girls with each other, they shared their phone calls from girls with each other, and they sometimes even shared girls with each other, passing numbers and addresses to their friends, "like a pen pal," one of the young men suggested with a knowing laugh. The boys were well aware of who was receiving how many phone calls from girls, and they often teased each other about juggling girls or about how they hadn't been getting many phone calls at all lately.

Some of the boys had more serious, long-term relationships with girls "on the outs." Many of the young men (perhaps a third of the boys in the cottage at any given time) were already fathers. Although there were differing levels of involvement with their children and "my baby's mom," they all seemed to take a certain amount of pride in their paternity, and most said that they hoped to be good fathers and be there for their kids as they grew up. TJ and Marco, particularly, spoke often of their young daughters and proudly showed off Polaroid pictures and tattoos of their daughters' names and images. Many of their plans for the future centered around doing whatever was necessary to provide better lives for their little girls.

The residents' relationships with their girlfriends went through many ups and downs during their time in the institution. On one of my visits, the cottage supervisor told me that it had been a pretty quiet week and that a lot of the boys were having "girl problems" and were fighting with their girlfriends. He mentioned a few of the residents by name and said that he had heard them "crying on the phone" to their girls. Especially acute was the frustration that these boys felt on hearing rumors about their girlfriends seeing other men and not being able to confront them face-to-face. When I asked Alex one day, "What's up with your girl?" his response illustrated the general frustration and lack of efficacy the young inmates often felt when he said: "What's up with her? You know as much as I do. Nothing I can do about it while I am in here." The residents sometimes came to me for a female perspective, something clearly lacking in the male institution, but the seeds of doubt were easily planted and difficult to remove. Troubled teenagers to begin with, the young men in the Blue cottage faced a formidable challenge in dealing with and maintaining relationships from inside the institution.

Lessons Learned Over Time

Some lessons were simply the result of being locked up for months and years in a juvenile correctional institution. Whether they liked it or not, the young men in the Blue cottage were forced to learn patience. Much of their

time was spent waiting. Their daily lives were filled with waiting to be let out of their rooms, waiting to be allowed to shower, waiting to go to meals or recreation, waiting to be escorted to school or their jobs, waiting to use the phone, waiting for their next visit. Even watching television was a lesson in waiting. They would see advertisements for a new movie and would express their excitement over seeing the film, but the reality was that many of them would not be able to see that movie for years. They would see beautiful women on television and know that it would be months or years before sex with their girlfriends was a possibility. Ultimately, one thing their sentences taught all of the boys in the cottage was to find a way to endure the waiting and to survive their own impatience.

Finally, their time in the institution offered these young men a chance to reflect on their lives and their place in the world. It gave them the opportunity to really think about who they were before their incarceration, who they were turning into during their time in confinement, and who they wanted to be when they got out and grew up. Even in the confines of a juvenile correctional facility, "Emerging adulthood is arguably the period of the life course when the possibility for dramatic change is greatest" (Arnett, 2004, p. 190). Although not all of the boys took full advantage of the opportunity for such introspection, some clearly did. TJ, for example, made the comment that his 22-year-old unemployed brother should rob a bank and get locked up for 2 to 3 years; he thought it would give him a chance to get his life together because "prison gives you perspective."

DISCUSSION: LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT TRAINING SCHOOLS

Bartollas et al. (1976) concluded their study on a juvenile training school nearly 30 years ago with this dire message:

This is certainly not the first, nor is it likely to be the last, in a long series of books, monographs, and articles which indict the juvenile correctional system as anti-therapeutic, anti-rehabilitative, and as exploitative and demeaning of keepers and kept alike. The juvenile correctional institution, not unlike any other total institution, is or can be more cruel and inhumane than most outsiders ever imagine The juvenile institution is a culmination of the worst features of a free society. (p. 259)

Juvenile institutions are clearly not a panacea for the problems of juvenile delinquency, but as I argued earlier, they look better or worse depending on what we compare them to. Currently, violent adolescents who are considered

a danger to the community are generally sentenced to one of two options: training schools or adult prisons. With prison as the alternative, training schools appear to do less harm to the young offenders in their midst (Austin & Irwin, 2001), or as Feld (1998) suggests: "Despite extensive judicial findings of deplorable conditions of confinement, juvenile correctional facilities probably remain less harsh or abusive than most adult prisons" (p. 234).

Conditions of confinement were not, in fact, deplorable in the training school in this study, but incarceration and the pains of imprisonment would leave significant marks on all of the young males, regardless. Although incarceration appears to be a turning point for some offenders who desist from crime, for nearly all who pass through a correctional facility, it adds to the cumulative disadvantage and the obstacles they will face on their release. Incarceration may weaken community bonds, contribute to school failure and unemployment, and ultimately increase the likelihood for adult crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

The rationale for a separate system for juveniles is the belief that there is something qualitatively different about adolescents and that they should not be intermingled with adult offenders. Although those youths who have committed serious and violent crimes are often viewed as beyond rehabilitation (Lipsey, 1999), those working in the juvenile justice system continue to profess hope for the rehabilitation and resocialization of the young offenders in their care (Caeti, Hemmens, Cullen, & Burton, 2003). Following the developmental perspective, they recognize that damage done by the criminal justice system carries long-term consequences that are nearly impossible to reverse (Steinberg & Schwartz, 2000). As such, allowing even serious delinquents to remain in the juvenile justice system helps to diminish those long-term consequences and reaffirms the belief that young offenders have a chance to be resocialized and pointed toward more conforming futures, that they are capable of learning valuable life lessons during their time in the juvenile system.

Most of the boys in the Blue cottage would serve relatively long sentences for their violent offenses. If resocialization was to occur while they were under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system, the end-of-the-line training school was generally their most stable placement, the place where they endured a state mandated time out from their lives and were encouraged to consider what they wanted their futures to hold.

In spending time with the adolescent inmates in this study, it was impossible to ignore the very fact of their youth. They were, for the most part, still boys literally growing up and maturing behind bars. There was still an air of invincibility and enthusiasm in many of the boys and young men in the Blue cottage; most had not yet fully committed to the convict world. They held on

to at least some of their vulnerability and some hope for a better future. The juvenile system allowed them to make bad choices without necessarily throwing their lives away. As Feld (1996) explains: "One premise of juvenile justice is that youths should survive the mistakes of adolescence with their life chances intact" (pp. 425-426).

Compared to adult prisons, training schools such as the one in this study offer such young offenders a reprieve. They offer troubled adolescents one last opportunity to grow up a little, learn important lessons, and emerge from the institution with a chance to start their lives over. Many of them will cross the legal boundary into adulthood during their confinement; they enter the institution as boys and leave it as young men with new rights and responsibilities, facing their futures with both fear and hope. Emerging adulthood may hold particular promise for young men who are also emerging from juvenile prisons, for as Arnett (2004) has argued, "There is something about reaching emerging adulthood that opens up new possibilities for transformation for people who have had more than their share of adversity during their early years" (p. 205).

I heard again and again from individuals in this study, that "the system" cannot force anyone to change, that individuals have to want to change, they have to want to get out of "the life." The desire to change happened for some of the young men during their time in the Blue cottage as they matured and made strides toward becoming conforming adults. They are the success stories of the institution. In their efforts to overcome disadvantaged backgrounds and their own criminal histories, they provide an important lesson to the larger community by offering a compelling reason to strengthen the programming and opportunities in our juvenile correctional facilities and to continue giving adolescent offenders one last chance in the juvenile system.

REFERENCES

- Altschuler, D. M., & Brash, R. (2004). Adolescent and teenage offenders confronting the challenges and opportunities of reentry. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2, 72-87.
- Arnett, J. J. (1998). Learning to stand alone: The contemporary American transition to adulthood in cultural and historical context. *Human Development*, 41, 295-315.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J., & Irwin, J. (2001). *It's about time: America's imprisonment binge* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bartollas, C., Miller, S. J., & Dinitz, S. (1976). *Juvenile victimization: The institutional paradox*. New York: John Wiley.
- Bortner, M. A., & Williams, L. M. (1997). *Youth in prison*. New York: Routledge.

- Caeti, T. J., Hemmens, C., Cullen, F. T., & Burton, V. S., Jr. (2003). Management of juvenile correctional facilities. *The Prison Journal*, 83, 383-405.
- Chesney-Lind, M., & Shelden, R. G. (2004). *Girls, delinquency, and juvenile justice* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Feld, B. C. (1977). *Neutralizing inmate violence: Juvenile offenders in institutions*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Feld, B. C. (1996). Juvenile (in)justice and the criminal court alternative. In J. G. Weis, R. D. Crutchfield, & G. S. Bridges (Eds.), *Juvenile delinquency* (pp. 418-427). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Feld, B. C. (1998). Juvenile and criminal justice systems' responses to youth violence. In M. Tonry & M. H. Moore (Eds.), *Youth violence* (pp. 189-261). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feld, B. C. (Ed.). (1999). *Readings in juvenile justice administration*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Forst, M., Fagan, J., & Vivona, T. S. (1989). Youth in prisons and training schools: Perceptions and consequences of the treatment-custody dichotomy. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 40, 1-14.
- Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., Rumbaut, R. G., & Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2005). On the frontier of adulthood: Emerging themes and new directions. In R. A. Settersten Jr., F. F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 3-28). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums*. New York: Anchor.
- Grisso, T., & Schwartz, R. G. (2000). Introduction. In T. Grisso & R. G. Schwartz (Eds.), *Youth on trial: A developmental perspective on juvenile justice* (pp. 1-5). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Haskell, M. R., & Yablonsky, L. (1982). *Juvenile delinquency* (3rd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Irwin, J. (1970). *The felon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lane, J., Lanza-Kaduce, L., Frazier, C. E., & Bishop, D. M. (2002). Adult versus juvenile sanctions: Voices of incarcerated youths. *Crime & Delinquency*, 48, 431-455.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lipsey, M. W. (1999). Can intervention rehabilitate serious delinquents? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 564, 142-166.
- Miller, J. G. (1998). *Last one over the wall: The Massachusetts experiment in closing reform schools* (2nd ed.). Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Polsky, H. W. (1962). *Cottage six—The social system of delinquent boys in residential treatment*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Preveaux, N. E., Ray, G. E., LoBello, S. G., & Mehta, S. (2004). Peer relationships among institutionalized juvenile boys. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19, 284-302.
- Scott, E. S. (2000). Criminal responsibility in adolescence: Lessons from developmental psychology. In T. Grisso & R. G. Schwartz (Eds.), *Youth on trial: A developmental perspective on juvenile justice* (pp. 291-324). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Steinberg, L., & Schwartz, R. G. (2000). Developmental psychology goes to court. In T. Grisso & R. G. Schwartz (Eds.), *Youth on trial: A developmental perspective on juvenile justice* (pp. 9-31). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Sykes, G. M., & Messinger, S. (1960). The inmate social system. In R. A. Cloward (Ed.), *Theoretical studies in social organization of the prison* (pp. 5-19). New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Van Vleet, R. K. (1999). The attack on juvenile justice. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 564, 203-214.
- Weber, G. H. (1961). Emotional and defensive reactions of cottage parents. In D. R. Cressey (Ed.), *The prison: Studies in institutional organization and change* (pp. 189-228). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Wooden, K. (1976). *Weeping in the playtime of others: America's incarcerated children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Michelle Inderbitzin, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Oregon State University. Her research interests are focused around juvenile justice, inequalities in the justice system, and prison culture.