
OVERVIEW

Juvenile crime is quickly moving toward becoming one of America's leading concerns. In fact, former President Clinton at the end of 1995 declared juvenile violent crime to be the country's most serious crime problem. Disguised behind hardened, angry faces lies both America's biggest threat, and the Church's greatest opportunity.

SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO JUVENILE OFFENDERS

While adult violent crimes have remained fairly steady, juvenile offenses have soared since the mid-1980s. During the period from 1973 through 1988, the number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes (murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) varied with the size of the population. In the past ten years, however, the number of juvenile homicide offenders have nearly tripled, and this in a period where the number of sixteen and seventeen year olds in the U.S. population declined by 10%. On any given day in America in 1994, more than 60,000 juveniles were incarcerated; many in overcrowded facilities, and almost all boys. In 1991, juveniles were responsible for one in four personal crimes and one in five violent crimes.

The term which has become popularized to describe these young offenders is "Super-predators." Out of fear and frustration concerned citizens and policy makers have begun the process of dismantling the entire juvenile court system, transferring more and more teens into the adult prison system. Just from 1989 to 1993, the number of cases sent from juvenile to adult courts for trial has increased 41%, totaling 11,800 or one in every four juveniles arrested for violent crime.

Yet as one can imagine, simply putting more kids into our adult prison system only intensifies the problem. An exhaustive University of Florida study concluded that, "Juveniles sentenced to adult prisons revert to a life of crime more quickly after released-and commit more crimes, and more serious crimes-than those in juvenile institutions."

Nonetheless, the trend continues to make adult prisons across America home for more and more of America's troubled teens. Yet, these are not simply "short adults," as lawmakers insist. They are in fact kids, and they require an entirely different method of both treating them and ministering to them than do adults.

Many sincere efforts by caring Christians to reach troubled teens have been misdirected. The problem has not been that at-risk youth don't want God. On the contrary, many troubled young people are disillusioned with society and are actively seeking spiritual answers. In fact, surveys have revealed that the majority of high-risk youth are vastly more spiritually aware than the general population of kids.

What is it about juvenile offenders that makes them so different than the adult prison population? How should we be ministering to them differently if we want to be more effective?

While youth ministry is not specifically mentioned in Scripture, perhaps the most relevant verse to troubled youth ministry was penned by Paul in I Cor. 4:15, "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the
gospel" (NIV). Just as it was clear that the Corinthians had a bigger need for a father than another teacher, so also do troubled kids today. This verse lays the groundwork for a basic paradigm of effective ministry to juvenile offenders.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY"S JUVENILE OFFENDER**

In some ways kids are not any different than they have ever been. They've always had the same basic needs. Yet in another way, because so many kids have not had their basic, God-given needs met, the profile of the average kid has changed dramatically over the past twenty years.

Below of are several general observations about the make-up of what we come to term today, "at-risk youth."

**A MODEL OF MINISTERING TO KIDS THAT MEETS THEM WHERE THEY ARE**

Because one in two children now grow up without a father in the United States, and in our inner cities only one in five children live with their father, a whole new approach to youth ministry has become necessary.

It is best described by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father" (1 Cor. 4:15 NIV). Paul knew that these people didn't need another teacher, their needs were much deeper, they needed a father. One can't be a father to everybody, but Paul knew that God was calling him to be a father to some people in Corinth.

Does this mean that in order to be effective, we must become parents to these kids? No. We will never, nor should we attempt to, replace their parents. It is, in fact, very detrimental to even speak badly about their parents. Nothing will drive a wedge between you and a kid you're attempting to minister to, than cutting down his parents. Kids already know. We need to build upon whatever they have. "Reparenting," in this context is not an attempt to replace existing parents, but rather it is a level of discipleship and commitment to kids that goes to the core of their being-to touch their deepest issues.

It is usually not the big, complicated things that make the difference. In fact, U.S. News and World Report recently did a cover story on the resiliency factors necessary for kids to successfully overcome trauma. It was a compilation of several multi-million dollar studies. Look at what the top three factors were:

* Having a curfew  
* Eating dinner together as a family  
* Attending church

Not too complicated huh? Of course it is not these acts, in and of themselves, which make the difference. It is what they represent. Having a curfew represents boundaries. Eating one meal a day together represents community. Attending church represents spirituality.

Interesting enough, the biggest fear that kids have in coming to our home is eating dinner together as family. In fact, we have had some kids choose not to come just because of that. They are afraid of the intimacy that it represents, of getting too close to people. It is tragic also, how few families in our culture eat together anymore, especially with teenage children.
Below are several guiding principles for effective ministry to juvenile offenders in institutions within the paradigm of being a father or mother in the Gospel.

**USE A DISCUSSION-BASED FORMAT**

Rather than preaching or teaching, we've found a discussion-based program to be much more effective with youth. Kids need the opportunity to get to know and interact with positive Christian adults. They need to see what living and walking as a Christian looks like, up close. The discussion format offers that much more relational approach and provides the best environment for both learning and nurturing. If you tell a kid something, they may or may not think it's true. But, if they come up with the conclusion, then in their mind, it must be true. A good Bible study facilitator asks the right questions, leading kids to conclude the right answers.

One thing that youth lack today is healthy communication skills. This is partly due to so much media exposure which limits kids' interaction with others. This has also given them a very short attention span. Consequently we have a "remote control" generation who lack the ability to concentrate on things for very long periods of time. Thus, the ideal setting is to have everyone sit in a circle, rather than have one leader up front. It gives kids the sense that they are an important contributor to the group, and that their input is valued.

We call the program we run in juvenile institutions a Bible Discussion Group. They work best for groups of 2-20 youth, in the context of a one hour session.

The ground rules for each meeting are:

* Only one person speaks at a time.
* Each person's opinion is respected.
* No one in the group is allowed to talk about people who aren't there.

The Bible studies are topical in nature, and follow this basic format:

* Opening discussion. To solicit general discussion on the topic in order to create a non-threatening environment where it's clear that all input is welcome and appreciated. The questions should lead toward establishing a question or problem that is common to all. The goal is for the youth to conclude, "Ya, this is an area of my life that I can't handle on my own", or "That's a question that I've had for a long time, and I don't know the answer."
* Story or Illustration. This serves to further state the problem illustrated in the opening discussion. It helps create the need for a solution.
* Scripture. Here is where the solution is introduced.
* Wrap-up. This is where the leader transitions from an open discussion format, into one of wrapping the meeting up. Be sure to re-emphasize Scripture's answer to the problem/question introduced in the opening discussion. End by asking for prayer requests and praying.

It is important that the topics we address are ones that the kids are interested in or struggling with - that we're not answering questions the kids aren't asking. We want to create a hunger in them for the Truth, so that when we give the Answer, it will fall on readied hearts. We have written a Bible Discussion Group Manual containing forty different Bible study programs for use in juvenile institutions. It may be ordered through Straight Ahead Ministries.
REMEMBER WHERE YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO MINISTER

Juvenile ministry is done in a completely different context than is adult ministry. Most juvenile facilities are still based on the foundation of treatment rather than punishment. Thus, most treatment directors are very concerned with kids being side-tracked from dealing with their issues, something they often fear religion may do.

Treatment staff worry about kids not taking ownership for their behavior, saying, "The devil made me do it." They're concerned that kids use God as a way to escape taking responsibility. Also, because these kids are minors, there is always the potential argument for separation of church and state. "People aren't allowed to come into public schools and lead Bible studies. Why should we allow it here?" they ask. While most religious groups have a right to offer programs in adult prisons, the general rule in most juvenile centers is that religious programs aren't allowed.

This does not mean that effective ministry cannot occur in juvenile facilities, however. To the contrary, properly administered programs can actually greatly enhance any juvenile treatment facility's program. We have found that in the eighty juvenile facilities in which we operate Bible studies, the staff have seen it as an integral component in their program.

To be allowed the opportunity to lead a Bible study in a juvenile institution is a rare privilege. It is therefore necessary, when a program is allowed, that certain standards are strictly adhered to. These are the primary issues that address treatment officials' legitimate concerns when beginning a program:

* Voluntary; not a mandatory program.
* Inter-denominational; avoiding controversial doctrines such as mode of baptism, spiritual gifts, etc.
* Don't cut down other denominations.
* Positive; not condemning.
* Consistent; meeting each week, at the same time, with the same leaders (ideally two), for a minimum one year commitment.

Additionally, some of the most fruitful ministry can happen with staff, when we go in with a proper attitude of servanthood. Inviting staff to sit in on the Bible study if they desire, and refusing to allow kids to cut other staff down in the Bible study goes a long way. Also make it a point to mention to them the positive things you see them do for the kids.

Because staff generally are very concerned for the best interest of the youth, if they see your program as contributing to that, they'll be much more inclined to encourage kids to attend.

USE EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

This does not mean that you attempt to become "hip," trying to use their language and mannerisms. Nothing turns kids off quicker than an "old" person like us trying to be one of them. Be yourself.

What this does mean, however, is that we consciously attempt to use "non-Christianese" language. This is one of the hardest things for our Bible study leaders to do. Terms like salvation, justification, righteousness, holiness. They mean so much to us. But they mean absolutely nothing to the kids. Jesus didn't use big, sophisticated words. In fact, He usually told stories when he wanted to teach truths. Do the same.
Does that mean we shouldn't read the Bible, and only tell stories? Not at all. But it is important that you read from a version of the Bible that kids can understand. The Contemporary English Version put out by the American Bible Society, written at a third grade reading level is good. Others to consider are The Living Bible, The Everyday Bible, and The New Life Version.

**TAKE OPPORTUNITIES TO CELEBRATE THE LIVES OF KIDS**

Ron Hutchcraft termed this generation of kids a paper plate generation. What are paper plates good for? You use them and then just throw them away. Sadly, teenagers represent the only age group in our country where the death rate is actually going up. Kids are throwing their lives away everyday. Yet God doesn't make paper plates, He only makes the finest of china. He says, "Children are a gift of the Lord; blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." (Psalm 127:3, 5 NASB).

In the aftercare home that we operate, birthdays are always a big celebration. Everybody gathers around, as we enter the bedroom singing Happy Birthday, we deliver breakfast on a tray. Then we all gather downstairs to eat together.

When one of the first boys who moved into our house had his birthday, we came into his bedroom with the usual ordeal. As we began to sing though, he pulled the covers up over his head. This was not the response we were expecting. He began to shake, and we could see he was sobbing. We just left the breakfast there, blew out the candle and went downstairs. When he came downstairs he apologized for his behavior, but said that this was the first birthday party he had ever had.

Well, for his next birthday, he began planning it several months in advance. He secured the swimming pool of someone in the church, sent out invitations to a ton of people, and we had quite a party.

Celebrations don't have to be big, however, to make a big impact. Richie was in one of our Bible studies and asked us if we knew Ric and Laurie who lead a Bible study for us at another facility. We said we knew them. Richie said, "Ric and Laurie are like mom and dad to me." "Why do you say that?" we asked.

"Well, last week was my birthday. I didn't get a cake, or a card or a call from anybody. I was real down. But Ric and Laurie remembered, and they sent me a card. Here, you want to see it? They're just like parents to me."

**BELIEVE IN THEM EVEN WHEN THEY DO NOT BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES**

At one detention center Bible study I asked kids what they'd like to be doing in five years. Jeremy quickly responded, "Oh, I'll be in prison in five years." "Why do you say that?" I asked, "You'll be out of here in a couple of months." He responded, "Because I've always been a troublemaker and I'll always be a troublemaker." How many times do you think he had heard that said about himself?

Yet the power of one adult believing in a kid is enormous. Ricky, had pulled us aside after detention center Bible study. He said he had been secretly making weapons in his room out of combs and plastic silverware; and hiding them under his bed. We asked him how he felt about that. "I feel bad, that's why I wanted to talk with you, I'm not even sure why I'm doing it. I guess maybe it's just a habit."

"Ricky" we said, "You feel bad because Christ has made you a new person. The old Ricky would feel
very comfortable making and using weapons, but that person doesn't exist anymore." His face began to light up as we talked. Soon we all had to line up. As Ricky came into line a few minutes later, he whispered to us that he had just thrown all the weapons away.

I was also very insecure growing up. In fact, I had developed an ulcer by the eighth grade, due to excessive worry, anxiety, and a major inferiority complex. During the summers of my junior high school years, I worked for Larry, a farmer that I idolized. One evening when my family was visiting Larry's family, my mother asked Larry, "What do you think of Scott? Do you think he's going to make it?"

I was in the next room and they weren't aware that I could hear their conversation. Straining with all my might to hear Larry's reply, I heard, "Some day Scott will be the president of General Motors." Wow! It was the first time I remember ever receiving a compliment from anybody outside of my own family. And the fact that it was said behind my back made it that much more powerful.

The greatest gift we can give a kid is to work to instill a dream into them. When a kid begins to get a grasp for what God may have for them, suddenly things begin to change. All of a sudden they have a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to make it. We have to believe in them even when they don't believe in themselves.

REALIZE WHERE YOUR POWER COMES FROM

America's prisons are the devil's backyard, and for anything eternal to happen, prayer is essential. When we began in 1987, God laid upon our hearts Neh. 4:16; where half the people did the work while half stood guard. Intercessory pray-ers are the ones who stand guard. We have three people pray for each institution's needs every day, with updated requests weekly. Countless miracles attest to the faithfulness of those prayers.

We called one director of a detention center asking if he would consider allowing us to hold a Bible study there. He said, "I don't want anybody coming in here telling these kids that Jesus Christ is God. Will your group be doing that?" I said, "There's a pretty good chance that we will," I said. "Then I'm not interested," was his response.

Wow, that was about as flat a rejection as we had ever received. We decided to send him more information on our program anyway, and to put it on the prayer chain. About three weeks later that same director called us back, asking if there was any way we could start a Bible study at his unit. Prayer works.

CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE WHERE KIDS CAN RECEIVE A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST

While we can't give someone an encounter with God, we can pray and attempt to create an environment where the Spirit can arrest the heart of a young person; where they no longer believe because that's what a relative believed, but rather they have encountered the Living God and can never deny that He is real.

In John chapter four it was said of Jesus, "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Yet after they themselves were with Jesus for awhile, they began to shift the source of their belief saying, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we
have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (John 4:39, 42 NIV).

One night after a detention center Bible study Raphael said he was finally ready to surrender his life to Christ. He was very nervous, but he knew it was what he had to do. After he prayed, he had a confused look on his face, saying, "Is it just me?" "What do you mean?" we asked. "Is it just me or are all the colors brighter in here? Everything looks different." "It's just you Raphael," we said, "God has just given you a sign that what you just did is real."

We have no idea what ever happened to Raphael. But even if he slipped back into the old ways, someday when he's at the bottom again and asking what is really real, he'll likely remember that day when Christ entered his life, and maybe then be ready to come running back to Him. When a kid can say as Job, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5 NIV) he/she has been given a blessing that will bear long-term fruit.

There is no more rewarding ministry, than to have the opportunity to minister to hurting kids. Throughout Scripture, God actively seeks out at least five types of people: the poor, the sick, the orphan, the widow, and the imprisoned. On any given evening in a juvenile detention center, you'll likely meet three or four of these. If you want to be where God's heart is, what better place than in our juvenile jails. May His Spirit go before you and with you.

**REFERENCES**

* Gest, T. 1997 Straight Ahead Ministries, Inc.

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