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# Juvenile justice: Don't ignore girls

By  
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Lock 'em up.  
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That's the approach Florida has been taking to an extreme in recent years.

This expensive approach to justice has been so overused that prisons now are providing much of the mental health treatment in the state.

Juvenile justice is overlooking smart treatment that is less expensive and more effective than prison-style treatment facilities, the Blueprint Commission on Juvenile Justice reported several months ago.

So it's no surprise that girls are caught in the same backward dynamic.

Overly harsh

Too many girls with minor infractions are being referred to programs for serious offenders, reports the Children's Campaign, an impressive collaboration of the Women's Giving Alliance, the Jacksonville Community Foundation and the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, among others.

This hard approach away from rehabilitation to a more punitive approach began in 1999, reported the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in a report titled "Educate or Incarcerate," which focused on girls in Duval County. It was funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.

This approach resulted in the tragic case of the Florida Institute for Girls, a maximum security prison, which was closed in 2005 after a grand jury found evidence of abuse and victimization of the girls.

The result of the hard-edged approach is twofold:

1. Too many girls are not receiving the help they need.

2. When they do get help, it is much more expensive than necessary.

The Children's Campaign is trying to target more effective treatment.

"The philosophy of the Children's Campaign is that local communities are best suited to develop and implement local solutions based on their unique and personal perspectives," the campaign reported in a press release.

Duval County needs to be the center of such studies for good reasons. This county leads the state in the number of girls admitted for misdemeanors and non-law violations, though Duval is far from the most populous county in the state.

Statewide, over half of the girls admitted to residential programs had committed minor offenses such as disobeying a court order, reported the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability in 2006.

And girls are more likely to be admitted for less serious offenses than boys.

Too little treatment

The admissions often are made because the facilities have the only treatment programs.

"The Legislature could achieve savings by reducing beds in residential delinquency programs and creating community treatment programs for at-risk girls," the accountability office reported.

The state office proposed that community-based programs with records of success would cost less than placing girls in facilities.

Lawanda Ravoira, former president of the PACE Center for Girls, is director of the Children's Campaign's Justice for Girls: Duval County Initiative. This project is designed to promote more effective treatment of girls in the juvenile justice system.

Better models

One role model comes from PACE, with its amazing record of success; about 90 percent of its graduates stay free of the justice system.

The Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability proposed eliminating 50 beds in girls' facilities and replacing them with community programs that have shown success.

That makes sense. The wonder is that this more cost-effective approach takes so long to implement throughout the juvenile justice system.

Girls have special treatment needs. Roughly two-thirds of girls in commitment programs have experienced abuse or neglect, the state reported. Over 90 percent have mental health problems.

There is hope, however. A group of 319 girls who participated in the 2006 National Council on Crime and Delinquency study showed resiliency. Many did well in school, staying drug-free and having a

positive self-image.

These girls often need mental health and substance abuse treatment, family-focused services, specialized medical care, educational and job placement help, and transitional placement.

As a society, we have taken imprisonment to the extreme, resulting in too much cost and too little effectiveness.

"A major issue is the fact that every year the Legislature increases the budget for adult corrections and the budget for juvenile justice from the inception has been woefully inadequate," Ravoira said in an e-mail.

"Public safety should start with kids, and we need a Legislature that will invest in juvenile justice at the same parity/level that we invest in adult prisons."

The Children's Campaign is on the right track and deserves wide support.

Preventive Spending-

Floridians are willing to spend money on crime prevention programs. A scientific poll conducted in 2005 for the Children's Campaign and the Eckerd Family Foundation produced these key results:

- 60 percent of Floridians believe first in prevention and rehabilitation to fight juvenile crime.
- 81 percent believe in early intervention with juveniles with behavioral or mental problems.
- 91 percent believe we would have fewer adult criminals if we did a better job helping juveniles in trouble.
- 76 percent believe in specially targeted programs for young women in trouble.

Source: Barcelo & Co. Telephone survey in 2005 of registered active voters. Margin of error is plus or minus 3.5 percent.

Lockups-

Girls' admissions to juvenile facilities for minor infractions:

Duval: 61

Hillsborough: 48

Pinellas: 47 Palm

Beach: 40

Miami-Dade: 48

Source: 2006 report from the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability

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