



Editorial: Texas' pipeline to youth prison

Texas: Look beyond get-tough tactic for youths

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When a teenager waves a gun in your face and steals your wallet, it's hard to think empathetically about a time when he was just a little boy with dreams of being an astronaut or firefighter. For you, he's a criminal who belongs behind bars.

Prison might be the best option for some, but experts on the root causes of youth crime say there are smarter ways to turn wayward kids' lives around. At a recent Children's Defense Fund conference in Houston, specialists from around the country criticized the Texas education and juvenile justice systems for putting too much emphasis on get-tough tactics and too little on prevention.

Their startling examination of the "cradle-to-prison pipeline" suggests Texas actually predestines some children for a life of crime. Their findings help explain why youth crime in North Texas isn't abating despite police crackdowns and high incarceration rates.

Experts say the kids most likely to enter this pipeline are children who are neglected at home and misdirected at school. They tend to be high school dropouts and youths who had not learned reading skills by the fourth grade. They hit the streets angry, lost and vulnerable to bad influences.

Once a boy enters the prison system, there's an 80 percent chance he'll be back, either as a child or as an adult. The Texas Youth Commission reports a shocking 50 percent recidivism rate. Experts say TYC emphasizes drill sergeant tactics to instill fear and short-term discipline but fails with long-term rehabilitation.

The current system "simply is not working," says Pili Robinson, a senior consultant with Missouri's youth corrections division. Missouri once had a system like ours, but drastic reforms have brought recidivism rates down to a mere 8 percent.

Whereas Texas has expanded the number of youth prison beds, Missouri has closed its youth prisons altogether in favor of smaller home-style facilities housing about 40 inmates each. The personal attention each youth receives, with his family playing an integral role in his rehabilitation, helps explain why Missouri is succeeding where Texas and other states are failing, Mr. Robinson says.

His recommendations parallel those offered in October by Tracy Paul, a University of Texas at Dallas professor, during a Williams Institute panel discussion on youth crime in southern Dallas. He questioned how the state could justify a \$50,000 annual expense to house one child in TYC as cost-effective. It costs more than twice as much to incarcerate a child than it does to educate him, according to Children's Defense

Fund statistics.

An increased investment in our schools, especially at the elementary level, can pay huge dividends further down the road because it's in those formative years when things start to go wrong, experts say. An upfront investment in prevention can ultimately reap huge savings – and salvage lives – down the line.

Instead, Texas favors a disciplinary-referral program that targets children – even in pre-kindergarten – to be removed from classrooms for misbehaving. A 2005 Texas A&M study found that the single most important predictor of future involvement with juvenile justice is a history of disciplinary referrals in school.

The Texas system puts certain kids – particularly blacks and Hispanics – on a fast track for disciplinary referrals. Since 2003, Texas school districts have isolated thousands of students in disciplinary referral, including 500 pre-K and kindergarteners, and 2,100 first-graders. Are we setting these kids up for shame, inferior education, failure and a possible life of crime?

It doesn't have to be this way. A get-tough approach might once have made sense for legislators in Austin. But if we've inadvertently constructed a pipeline to youth prison, it's time to look for a better way.