

VIEWPOINTS

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KEEPING KIDS OUT OF JAIL

THREAT OF
INCARCERATION ISN'T
ENOUGH TO DETER
MANY YOUNG PEOPLE

It's summer. Kids are on the streets. The trick is to give them a reason to stay out of trouble — and out of jail.

There are programs intended to shock kids away from doing jail time, to be sure. But many of these programs may be seen as little more than character education on steroids. Most often, such programs target a majority-group perception of jail and the fear of incarceration. For children whose

families earn livable and stable incomes and who anticipate career choices along with the power to make investments, such an in-your-face kind of approach might be of benefit — after all, a felony conviction can seriously hinder job prospects and future earnings potential. But not all children think that way.

While the coalition of groups involved in these programs, and this most important of efforts, absolutely should be commended, it also might be worthwhile to assess their strategy a bit further. An important thing often overlooked in such programs is the fact that doing time has sadly evolved as a right of passage for some groups of young people — those living with chronically fewer job prospects and a much-reduced earning potential. Behavior typically viewed as illegal also can serve very distinct and important

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SPECIAL
TO THE NEWS



Schools must view academic intervention as a direct and proactive response to many of the intensive problem behaviors in urban school systems.

Culture of public schools must be changed

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personal purposes. On the street, fewer folks mess with you when they know you have taken a bullet or would either open fire or fight with little provocation. That can simply become a way of getting by, and the fear of jail may be far less than the fear of letting down one's guard.

When kids are living in hopeless poverty, see little future outside of that hopelessness and wouldn't really know how to search for opportunities from which they are largely cut off based on education, color, income levels and very limited resources, the threat of incarceration may not seem quite as, well, threatening.

A key, then, is whether these young people have a reason to stay out of jail.

Most important is whether these young people actually think they have something to lose by going to jail. People tend to seek the most immediate and easy way to get benefit, even when a more valuable return might be had with a little more patience and effort. For young people really to be lured away from behavior that dramatically increases the chance of going to jail, they need something that is of more immediate worth and value. Long-term promises made when the realities don't mesh will have little impact.

Another reality is that most juveniles are well aware that they are less likely to be jailed, or jailed for much shorter periods, should they be caught. And how many studies on recidivism need to be published before it is finally recognized that once young people have done even hard time in adult prisons, a high percentage are likely to be back in prison soon after they're released into the same environment and same sense of desperation? Somehow, we need to spend more time giving young people a real reason to stay out of jail rather than simply trying to convince them that jail isn't fun.

While the rush to incarcerate and punish may provide a sense of satisfaction to some, one must question whether this approach is really working. A study done several years ago found that slightly more than 10 percent of the entire African-American male population between the ages of 25 and 29 was in jail, and about 13 percent could not vote due to a criminal record. The study also identified that there are more African-American men in jail than in college, with those numbers increasing at a rate of about 3 percent each year.

Besides the obvious fact that the continual emphasis on punishment and the threat of punishment is not working, the loss of such a vast pool of people who could otherwise be participating, productive members of society is illogical. It is also expensive. Think about a system that continues to build more and more prisons, thereby taking a complete and perpetual loss on the human capital involved, rather than one that offers more student and vocational training opportunities and loans with their longer-term economic and social investment and gain.

A report in 2003 indicated that only 52 percent of black men between the ages of 16 and 64 were employed and that this percentage had dropped 12 points since 2000. We know that when people lack needed skills and resources for success, they get frustrated and angry. And persistent dissatisfaction and anger leads to acting out largely independent of the threat of punishment.

We must effectively identify the reasons for the behaviors that lead so many young minority



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News File Photo

Students at Emerson School of Hospitality learn how to prepare food in a kitchen at the school in Buffalo, which blends academics and training for a career in the food industry.

people to prison, and offer logical and positive alternatives. Rather than simply exhorting young people to stay out of jail, it would seem that a new approach is needed — one that would include more concrete reasons to stay out of jail, combined with an emphasis on the resources and skills that would help increase greatly the chance for success. What, then, to do?

The public school system must be seen as the first option for change. Schools that continue to use a consequence-based system — one that waits for chaos and failure before responding — must be restructured. There is extensive literature that clearly links academic deficits to sometimes significant behavioral problems. Schools must view academic intervention as a direct and proactive response to many of the intensive problem behaviors in urban school systems such as Buffalo — the same behavioral problems that too often lead young people directly to jail.

With this, schools need to provide additional faculty training and support to help teachers teach all students rather than just those generally willing to be taught. Multiple studies indicate prisons are full of people who lived with unidentified and significant learning disabilities throughout their time in public schools. This implies a strong association between academic failure and eventual incarceration.

Training faculty to better provide instruction that distinctly addresses specific learning needs, then, actually may help reduce the number of people who wind up in jail. School culture must similarly be changed toward the development of rapport rather than antipathy between teachers and students.

Individual schools include those people who best know their neighborhoods, students and families. For this reason, schools should be given more local control, with the district administration decentralizing its day-to-day management of

those schools. While central administration should retain direct authority over curriculum benchmarks, for instance, individual schools are in a unique position to determine how to best present and engage their students in that curriculum. With clearly stated benchmarks and enhanced authority, principals would likely be more than willing to accept increased responsibility for the outcomes of their respective schools.

School programs also must be re-examined and, in some circumstances, overhauled. We know students do much better and are more likely to show up for school in the first place when they see a reason to be there and when school makes sense. Buffalo Public Schools should start to very actively consider an emphasis on vocationally oriented high schools, where students will not only earn their high school degrees but can learn hands-on job skills that interest them and offer them a future.

The premise of college is simply not, nor should it be, considered the end-all for everybody. As argued in the April 27 edition of the *Chronicles of Higher Education*, it is time to break up the often platonic view of education and focus on the skills, knowledge and outcomes needed for success. Rather than pushing high school students into a make-or-break college preparatory curriculum, this commentary argues, the focus also should be on preparing students to meet the real demands made by jobs that will pay them a living wage and offer a livable and hopeful future.

Young people will be more likely to stay out of jail when they develop a sense of self worth linked to competence and success, and are better able to take care of themselves and their own.

Such schools, for instance, might be modeled after the very effective Emerson School of Hospitality in downtown Buffalo, which specializes in food services and nutrition. Attendance is consis-

tent and discipline problems low, compared to other schools in Buffalo. How many other skills could be taught through similar programs? How many kids could be given a clear alternative to jail as a result?

Of course, to effect these changes, the system would have to be supportive. The school administration and teacher unions absolutely must identify and work toward a unified set of outcomes. Families, and urban families in particular, must be able to maintain access to health care and reliable, competent child care. It is wholly illogical to assume that young, often single parents will be able to reliably attend school and hold jobs if they are not confident that their own children will be properly cared for when they are away from them.

Some schools serving younger children have physicians and dentists who visit the school on scheduled intervals to see students in need. Perhaps such a model could be pursued within the public schools as well. Uncared for dental, medical and vision needs are not uncommon in urban areas and can also directly conflict with a successful and sustained attention to school.

Child and health care might even become primary programs that could be offered through local high schools. Students who are trained during the school day as child care providers and specialists could then be given time to work in an on-site facility under professional supervision. This is exactly the model used at the Emerson School targeting food services and nutrition. Similarly, a school focused on the health professions could train students to earn a living as home health aides, hospital or nursing home staff while offering a chance for eventual training as medical or allied health professionals.

Another avenue to consider would be to channel money now going to the prison systems to pay the often wide range of natural helpers who currently exist in urban communities — grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, mothers and fathers, as well as local store owners, clergy and folks in every neighborhood. Money now being doled out as social subsidies could be in part reworked to pay these often amazing persons as they care for children, other families and their neighborhoods.

The same groups raising money for commercials to "stop the violence" might consider redirecting some of their funds to pay these natural helpers, while seeking additional grants and external funding. Who better to staff and manage community services that could offer young people and others a safe place to go to socialize, study and access tutoring or training? Additional funding would go a long way to drawing in both volunteers and part-time subsidized staff. Rather than talking about life with a felony rap sheet, efforts should be focused on offering clear alternatives to those behaviors that too often lead to that felony rap sheet.

An effort to convince young people that jail is neither a career option nor a way to spend a few years of their lives is righteous and important. At the same time, the numbers of minorities currently in jail should be seen as a failure of the system rather than the individual.

Serving time and the abject loss of one's freedom is not a naturally sought human condition. If we truly want to keep young people from viewing prison as an acceptable risk attached to an intolerable lifestyle, we must offer true options and consider real system change.