

A More Effective Juvenile Justice System for Monroe County

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Abstract

Modifications at the local judicial circuit level can result in a more effective juvenile justice system for Monroe County. Current legislation does not address the needs of the community as have circuits in other states. This research examines legal systems shown to be effective in reducing juvenile crime. A related issue of parental responsibility is also examined. Survey after survey in the United States ranks crime as the number one concern of the American people. Increases in juvenile crime have led to tougher laws, more programs, and in some cases, additional funding to communities and government agencies combating the problem.

The focus of this research is the programs created in Monroe County, Florida, many without additional funding, meant to address this widespread problem.

Introduction

Juvenile crime has become one of the primary concerns for law enforcement in the United States and is expected to remain a priority in the future. At the 1995 International Association of Chiefs of Police Conference in Miami, the organization's new president, David Walchak, listed the growing juvenile crime rate as one of the two most important issues for law enforcement to conquer in the next several years (Law and Order, 1995). United States Attorney General Janet Reno and "America's Most Wanted" creator John Walsh echoed this theme in their addresses to the general assembly at the conference.

In today's climate of 'do more with less', law enforcement officials are challenged with new or expanded problems and a static or shrinking budget to combat the problems (Raspberry, 1993). The juvenile crime problem is well documented: Juvenile crime has been increasing and it continues to increase ("Violent crime dips", 1995); juvenile arrests have increased since 1980 and more juveniles have formally appeared before juvenile courts (Visher, Lattimore, Linster, 1991). This crisis reflects poorly on a series of systems that appear to be failing all citizens of society (DeParle, 1996).

There are many problem areas within the system: education, parenting, peer groups, violence in the mass media, unresponsive juvenile court systems, under-staffed correctional facilities, poorly trained law enforcement officers, and inadequate laws (Economist, 1993). No one area can be singled out as the main reason for the increase in juvenile crime and violence (Burden, 1995).

According to William Renfro (Presentation to the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute, 1995) one explanation for the increase in juvenile crime is demographics. Renfro points to the beginning of what he terms the 'echo boom', the 30 year delayed result of the original baby boom resulting in an increase in population of males between the ages of 17 and 25, the age during which most crimes are committed.

The Juvenile Justice Act of 1994 reformed Florida's juvenile justice system. It reduced the obstacles caused by confidentiality and provided for local or regional alternatives in court filings, trial alternatives, and sentencing (Patterson, 1995). It is this reform that opened the door to creative alternatives for all institutions dealing with juveniles in the state.

The legislation was passed as a result of the increases in juvenile crime, and because of the publicity surrounding the abject failures of the juvenile justice system. A stark example making national headlines was the killing of a British tourist at rest stop in Madison County in 1993 (Lawrence, 1995). Billy Joe Crumitie, a 14 year old with an extensive criminal record, had been moved from his home in Miami and placed with relatives in Monticello, Florida by Florida's Health and Rehabilitative Services, the agency charged with the responsibility of monitoring juvenile delinquents. On a September night, Crumitie and two other juveniles attempted to rob the victim and her boyfriend who were sleeping in their car at the rest stop. The victims resisted the robbery attempt and were shot through the window of the vehicle. The male victim died immediately.

The resulting outcry from people who no longer felt safe in small-town America, and from the tourist industry, prompted Governor Lawton Chiles to mandate 24 hour security at all Florida rest stops. Despite his efforts, tourism suffered greatly because of the negative publicity Florida was receiving over this and other violent crimes. The 1994 Juvenile Justice law that followed the Crumitie incident focused on the need for local control over juvenile justice programs rather than a mandated statewide cookie-cutter approach.

The Monroe County Model

Monroe County has been known for its progressive methods in addressing crime. Long before domestic battery became a nationwide issue, the criminal justice system implemented a preferred arrest policy on batterers with aftercare for both victims and defendants. Concerns over juvenile crime were no different. Following are examples of the methods used by the Monroe County criminal justice system to prevent and combat juvenile crime.

Juvenile Alternative Sentencing

The Juvenile Alternative Sentencing Program (JASP) was started in Monroe County in the early 1990's, well before juvenile violence claimed the nations' attention. JASP involves routing first-time, non-violent juvenile offenders through a deferred sentencing program which mandates parental involvement and usually community service. Failure to complete community service results in charging the original offense and a routing through juvenile court. Juveniles may be placed in this alternative sentencing program only three times.

Until recently, JASP community service projects were limited because of a lack of people to supervise the juveniles. Now, however, Monroe County Sheriff's Office Detention Deputies volunteer to work a shift outside their corrections facilities supervising a number of community service projects.

Graffiti Eradication

The way Monroe County handled graffiti is a perfect example of melding needs with community resources in solving a problem. Although the county has no organized gangs, there are a handful of gang members living and visiting the islands. They leave

their mark in the form of tagging and graffiti, causing a poor reflection on our community. Businesses donated paint to deputies who immediately covered graffiti as they came upon it, eliminating competing graffiti from other groups or gangs. Additionally, at the request of the sheriff's office, businesses throughout the county agreed to withhold the sale of spray paint to minors. No legislation was necessary because of the close working relationship between law enforcement and business owners. Monroe County is virtually free of graffiti, but when it does show up, juveniles through the JASP program are now responsible for painting it out.

Project Midnight

Project Midnight, started by the sheriff's office and based on the program in Charleston, South Carolina was begun in the county in 1994. This voluntary curfew program requires a parent to sign a form giving law enforcement officers permission to pick up their child and take him or her home if the child is out after midnight.

Family Services Planning Team

The upper Keys Guidance Clinic has started a pilot program to attempt to improve conditions in the home of troubled children. The philosophy is that much of juvenile crime is a result of what a child learns at home, or how the child lives. The Family Services Planning Team is a group of mental health professionals who work with families to provide assistance in whatever areas the family shows weaknesses. Once the weaknesses are identified, the team works to provide the necessary resources to the family to correct the problems.

After School Child Care/Tutoring

The Middle Keys Guidance clinic has developed a school education program for high school students to educate them in adult behavior. The program is designed to assist teachers in the areas of sex education, drug awareness, and conflict resolution instruction. It is intended to pick up where Drug Awareness and Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) ends.

Eliminating Violence on School Grounds

A zero tolerance for school violence philosophy has been adopted after a series of incidents in county schools pointed to the increase in school violence. School Resource Officers receiving reports of school violence are now required to follow through with the State's Attorney's office for prosecution of the offender regardless of the victim's unwillingness to pursue charges. Much like the county's domestic violence preferred arrest policy, this school-based program sends a clear signal that violence on school grounds is not tolerated.

Additionally, three alternative education facilities have been funded by the school board which will separate disruptive students from the rest of the student body. These facilities are used to house students on in-school suspension as well.

Athletics as an Alternative

Because the county has limited recreational facilities, finding and funding youth athletics has always been a problem. One answer was to form a cooperative

agreement between the county and the school board which allows county sponsored athletic events to occur on school grounds. A roller hockey league was subsequently formed in Marathon. The leagues' membership is comprised largely of juveniles.

Another project which arose from a community problem and is now being solved by the Marathon community is the establishment of an area within the community to be used for rollerblading. Complaints from business owners prompted deputies to chase juvenile rollerbladers off their property, which then prompted complaints from parents whose law abiding children were being discouraged from participating in a positive activity.

Working together, parents, business owners, sheriff's deputies and county commissioners are moving toward using an abandoned portion of the Marathon airport as a rollerblading area. The hurdles have been many, including concerns for liability and the cost of insurance. In the meantime, a local business owner has donated the use of his unused parking lot for use by this group of teenagers.

Old Fashioned Enforcement

As can be proven time and time again throughout the country, focused enforcement tactics by law enforcement make major inroads in reducing crime. Because of a growing concern on the part of deputies in the Marathon district of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office about juvenile crime, the deputies concentrated their efforts on eradicating the problem. The major benefit of the small geographic area of the district was that deputies knew the names and faces of the most problematic kids. Deputies established an intelligence data base which was contributed to by all squads and continually updated. Juvenile cases were monitored by a detective until their court disposition.

Over the course of one year, 127 juveniles were identified as either involved in, or being at risk of involvement in delinquent behavior. Fifty eight were arrested for one or more felonies and 15 left the area. Juveniles living in Marathon have received a clear message that unlike many other parts of the country, they will be held accountable for their actions.

If there is one area Monroe County is found lacking, it is in compiling statistics of the effectiveness of these programs. Additionally, as with many new programs which focus on enforcement, statistics will increase, as exemplified by increase in arrests for violence on school property. Because of the preferred arrest program instituted in 1996, violence on school grounds appears to have increased over 1995 when, in fact, the increase has been caused by the reporting of such violence.

Future Trends

With the enactment of the Juvenile Justice Act, and the granting of more local control, Monroe County authorities set about making more positive changes in their methods for handling juvenile crime. The foundation of those changes was a focus on forming community partnerships in order to reduce the isolation of the juvenile systems in place at the time, and to make use of resources previously ignored.

The Monroe County Juvenile Justice Advisory Council was formed as directed by the Juvenile Justice Act of 1994. The council members include representatives from all phases of the criminal justice system and members of the community who are involved in short- and long-term planning in addressing juvenile crime.

Monroe County's Juvenile Justice Council is working on other programs to address not just delinquent juveniles, but those at risk of becoming offenders. One such program is the linking of local and state agency information systems so that information on a juvenile can be updated and accessed by all those with a need to do so. In this manner, at risk children would be identified at a much earlier stage and assistance such as that provided by the Family Services Planning team can be applied to correct the situation.

Another plan is to enhance existing after school care programs for children. Currently, there is no government subsidized child care in the county other than for those families living in HUD projects. County school administrators are researching funding to provide for child care and teacher instruction. Volunteers have already expressed an interest in this program in Marathon.

The Council has been examining the feasibility of jailing juveniles after a second or third offense, as opposed to allowing them to participate in the JASP option. A step beyond the 1970's 'scared straight' program, juveniles would be placed in a controlled environment sooner than they would be qualified to be placed in other facilities, like boot camps. The juveniles would be tutored and be required to perform work inside the facility.

Conclusion

Monroe County shares many of the juvenile crime problems as other areas around the country. However, where in many areas services are not provided to address the problem because of lack of resources, that same lack of resources has spawned a creativity and use of non-traditional resources not often seen in other jurisdictions. Monroe County truly does more with less because it's leaders both within and outside the criminal justice system are willing participants in the fight against crime.

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