Growing Up Behind Bars:  
An Ethnographic Study of Adolescent Inmates in a Cottage for Violent Offenders

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study is to direct attention inside the walls of a juvenile correctional facility to closely examine the experiences and daily lives of adolescent inmates. The ethnographic data for this study were collected through participant-observation and extended interactions in a cottage for violent male offenders in one state’s maximum-security training school. This paper examines the adjustments and survival strategies of young offenders as they adapt to life inside the institution. The boys in this study face a particularly tough adolescence as they come of age in a “society of captives” (Sykes, 1958) where each individual’s manhood and sense of self is continually tested. This paper offers a view from the inside, giving voice to young inmates, elucidating their struggles, their issues and concerns. Adolescent inmates in the juvenile justice system are virtually always released back into the community in a matter of months or years; understanding the way they experience incarceration is an important step in creating policy that will facilitate their reentry and offer hope for a conforming future. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS Offender, adolescent, inmate, training school, culture, ethnography
There are few populations as feared as the young male criminal, and as invisible as the incarcerated juvenile offender. This study delves into the daily lives of young males who were spending a significant portion of their teenage years in a juvenile training school, prison to their hopes, their hormones and their physical and psychological selves. It is an explicit attempt to make visible the patterns of their lives and the ways in which they experienced punishment as they were “locked in institutions where, we are prone to say, they ‘served their time,’ ‘paid their debt to society,’ and, perhaps, ‘learned a lesson’” (Cressey, 1961, p. 1).

Although caught in the midst of a punitive era of juvenile justice, the boys in this study did not paint themselves as victims. Each made choices that resulted in his incarceration—choices they fully owned and choices most would make again given the same set of circumstances. They viewed themselves as survivors making their way through turbulent times, the resourceful stars of their own life stories. As such, they bided their time in the juvenile prison, enduring the boredom, humiliation, and solitude, and making the best of a bad situation.

In his classic study on a maximum-security prison for adults, Sykes (1958) makes the point that treating inmates like helpless children poses a severe threat to their self-image. This becomes an interesting question when dealing with juvenile inmates, who are literally children, and who have never experienced full acceptance into the adult world with all of its rights and privileges. The oldest inmates in this study—those who had reached the age of 19 or 20—felt the threat to their psychological selves most acutely, but many of the boys in the institution had basically been independent and on their own for some time before being incarcerated, so the restrictions stung for all of them. The deprivation of autonomy may be less severe for a population of juvenile offenders than it is for adults, but the highly restrictive treatment they receive in a juvenile prison may ultimately pose more damage in the long term to self-concepts that are not yet fully formed. This study examines the struggles, strategies, and adaptations of adolescent males incarcerated in an end-of-the-line state training school as they attempted to preserve and develop their self-images while serving their time and growing up behind bars.

To understand the experiences of adolescent males living in training schools, it is important to recognize the context in which they have grown up. These are boys who were born in the 1980s; they were raised in a time of soaring crime rates and public fear. Many of them grew up in communities and families devastated by the ready availability of guns and drugs. Many of the boys in this study were active drug dealers.
at a very young age, working to provide themselves and their families with basic needs and small luxuries. They defended their territory, their reputations, and their gangs with force and with gunshots when they deemed it necessary. They lived the “fast life” by circumstance and by choice, and they ultimately faced severe consequences for their actions. They hit their teenage years at a time when crime policy took a particularly punitive stance toward juvenile offenders. In what Jeffrey Fagan has referred to as the “War on Kids,” the rhetoric of juvenile justice shifted away from a focus on rehabilitation to focus instead on punishment, accountability, and incapacitation.

Even as these boys were growing up in troubled families and communities and getting involved in criminal pursuits, scholars were warning the public of a new epidemic of young villains. Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters (1996) argued that “The problem is that today’s bad boys are far worse than yesteryear’s, and tomorrow’s will be even worse than today’s” (pp. 26-27). Bennett et al. went on to describe the juvenile offenders of our worst fears:

America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile ‘super-predators’—radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders. They do not fear the stigma of arrest, the pains of imprisonment, or the pangs of conscience. (p. 27)

Snyder and Sickmund (1999) suggest that by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the public viewed superpredators as “juveniles for whom violence was a way of life—new delinquents unlike youth of past generations” (p. 130). As such, it was not difficult to understand the persistent cries for harsher punishments and less coddling of young murderers, rapists, robbers, and gang-members. Although Snyder and Sickmund went on to conclude that “national crime and arrest statistics provide no evidence for a new breed of juvenile superpredator” (p. 132), the image was out there and the damage had been done. By the mid-1990s, most states had passed new laws making it easier to transfer juvenile offenders to the adult system; there was a clear, public movement to adjudicate more and more juveniles in adult criminal courts and to confine them in adult prisons (Howell, 1998). As such, it seems reasonable to question whether the idea of a separate juvenile justice system has outlived its usefulness. To answer this question, this study is focused on the population of juvenile offenders who are most like their counterparts sen-
enced as adults—older males sent to a maximum-security training school for violent offenses. In some ways, these boys were fortunate to receive a juvenile sentence rather than time in a prison alongside adults. They were given a chance to pay their debt to society and learn valuable lessons without establishing a permanent criminal record and further diminishing their life chances. This paper attempts to dig beneath the rhetoric of the institution to discover how these adolescent inmates spent their days and what they learned during their time in the training school.

Juvenile correctional institutions are responsible for incarcerating young offenders and carrying out the punishments handed down by the state. At the same time, they espouse the hope that they can reform the youths in their care. Feld (1999) argues that there is a continuing gap in juvenile correctional facilities between “the rhetoric of rehabilitation and its punitive reality” (p. 243). Recent studies (Forst, Fagan, & Vivona, 1989; Lane, Lanza-Kaduce, Frazier, & Bishop, 2002) suggest that when asked to reflect on their own experiences in juvenile corrections and adult prisons, young offenders found their time in the “deep end” of juvenile corrections to be their most helpful placement. They identified a combination of programming, caring staff, and smaller populations which helped to make training schools a better experience than the more punitive prisons where they were incarcerated alongside generally older, stronger, more chronically criminal adults. They also made the point that sanctions earlier in the juvenile justice system ultimately had little impact on their attitudes or behavior. They felt that the short sentences and relatively loose supervision did not give them enough time to get away from their lives on the outside and invest in the programming.

The question, then, is what is happening today in these “deep end” juvenile corrections placements? Interviews and statistics tell one part of the story; ethnographic accounts put such data into perspective. This study offers a snapshot of a particular time, place and attitude in the history of juvenile justice. It is an effort to look inside the walls of one maximum-security training school, to take notice of what serious and chronic juvenile offenders were doing and learning inside the institution, and to pay attention to how they spent their days and served their time. The boys in this school could take some comfort in knowing that they would get out within a matter of months or years; by state law, even the most serious offenders in the training school would be released when they turned 21. They would return to their communities, bringing with them all that they had learned and all the ways that they had
changed while becoming men behind bars. As these boys and many others like them cycle through the turnstile of juvenile justice, this paper attempts to focus attention inside the walls of one juvenile prison. It is an effort to make visible a hidden population, to describe the day-to-day experiences and survival strategies of incarcerated adolescent males.

**METHODS**

**Study Population**

By spending time in one state’s juvenile “agency of last resort” (Gibbons & Krohn, 1986), the present writer hoped to discover what the end-of-the-line training school offered and if those living and working within the institution found it worth keeping as a separate and viable response to serious juvenile offenders. The training school in this study housed the state’s most serious “problem children” (a term staff members frequently used to describe the boys in their care), a population of chronic and violent male offenders ranging in age from 15 to 20. Most of the young men in this training school had served time in other juvenile institutions before this one, and this was often their last stop before facing adult consequences for their crimes.

The institution in this study is very much a juvenile prison. The perimeter of the campus is clearly defined by a tall fence with razor wire coiled around the top. Specialized security staff monitors the double-gated entrance and all movement within the walls. At the time of this study there were about 200 boys sentenced to this training school and becoming men in its midst. Based on his offense, each youth was assigned to a “cottage” living unit, which would be his home during his incarceration. The boys would attend school, work a job somewhere within the institution, go to recreation for one hour a day at the central gym, and eat their meals in the institution’s main cafeteria, but each night they would return to their cottage. Cottages generally consisted of a common living room area where the boys would watch television and hold group meetings and counseling sessions; a small kitchen area where they could fix snacks; a game room which held a pool table and a video game; a small laundry room; a bathroom; and a hallway of sixteen locked rooms. While there was some freedom of movement within the common areas of cottages at designated times, the outside doors of the cottages were locked at all times and the windows in the rooms had bars on them. The cottage staff operated out of an office in the middle of the
living unit, where they could easily watch the common areas through the windows and control the locks on all of the room doors from a central electronic panel.

In trying to build trust and relationships in order to see the deeper levels of meaning as well as ordinary actions, the researcher chose to focus on one cottage and its inhabitants. Most of the researcher’s time was spent in the “Blue” living unit—a cottage of violent offenders, housing at any given time eighteen to twenty-six “residents,” most of whom were gang-affiliated, minority males. The Blue cottage was widely recognized and referred to by those on the grounds as the “ghetto” of the institution, housing the toughest kids and bearing the worst reputation. Being assigned to the Blue cottage largely defined the institutional experience for the inmates housed in its confines. To some extent, they shared more than time in the cottage—they shared its reputation and all that went with it. The boys seemed to share, as Goffman (1961) suggests, “a lively sense of common fate” (p. 59), which bound them together as a sort of surrogate family.

Procedure

The data for this study were gathered through on site observations over a period of approximately fifteen months in 1998-1999. Over the course of the study, the researcher averaged approximately one visit per week, generally staying for seven or eight hours at a time. Those visits often took place on Saturdays and afternoons and evenings when the boys would be out of school and spending unstructured time in the cottage. On different occasions, the researcher attended staff meetings, dinners, recreation, and even the high school graduation of two of the boys in the cottage. Most frequently, however, time was spent simply “hanging out” in the cottage, watching, listening, and interacting with the “residents” (the school’s preferred term for its inmates) and the staff members. On the first visit to the cottage, staff members informed the boys that the researcher was from a state university and might want to interview some of them. One of the more vocal boys immediately commented, “You know we’re just gonna lie,” which ultimately helped to clarify and refine the research strategies for this study. In response to such clearly-stated cynicism over talking to an outsider, plans for doing formal interviews were replaced with methods of gathering information through less intrusive means—through informal conversations, by listening to the kids and the staff, by asking questions, and by paying attention and observing the interactions in the cottage. The researcher
followed a strategy similar to the one that Carroll (1974) adopted in his study of race relations in a maximum-security prison; he explains:

A large amount of data was gathered by participating with inmates in spontaneous discussions about past, present, and future events. Such discussions provided insight into the meaning that events held for prisoners, a comparison of racial differences in meanings and focal concerns, as well as factual information about the events being discussed. At times I was a passive participant in such discussions. At other times, however, I directed the discussion into areas that interested me by interjecting questions at appropriate points. (pp. 14-15)

As the weeks and months passed and the researcher remained a consistent presence in the cottage, more and more of the boys chose to voluntarily “tell their stories” and their opinions. The researcher was especially fortunate to befriend the two most powerful inmate leaders of the cottage early in this study. At 19 and 20, they were older than most of the other residents, and they had already established their high status and tough reputations. One of them took a lot of ribbing and teasing from his fellow inmates for spending time talking to the researcher, a relatively young, white female. His response was that they were immature kids and, “what do I care what they think?”

One of the most important things that these two leaders did was to introduce the researcher to their friends in the cottage. Their friends would sometimes join in conversations, and by the time these original two left the cottage, the study’s network of informants had snowballed considerably. It helped, too, that one of the guys was Hispanic (Tony) and one (Kody) was African-American; with their assistance, the researcher was at least partially accepted by both racial groups. Since there were very few Caucasian kids in the cottage at the beginning of this study, this was no small feat. As time passed, it got to the point where the researcher had been around longer than most of the residents; the new kids coming into the cottage took their cues from others and accepted the researcher as a non-threatening, non-disruptive presence.

Much of what was learned in this study was verified in informal conversations with staff or inmates or in listening to conversations between friends. Versions of the same story were often told more than once, from different perspectives. Many of the boys and most of the staff spoke freely, stopping on occasion to translate their slang, or to catch the researcher up to speed by giving the background on the specific
story. Perhaps the biggest vote of confidence for the validity of this study came in the form of an offhand comment from one of the former residents. Alex had been out of the institution for several months and had struggled through some painful adjustments. In a phone conversation, he mentioned how he believed his time in the institution had not helped him at all and had, in fact, made things worse for him when he got out; he went on to say: “you were there with us . . . you saw the problems.” It was a simple statement, but it reinforced the researcher’s belief that the interactions witnessed were real and meaningful.

FINDINGS

In studying the culture of the Blue cottage, it was clear that the inmate code shaped the experiences of the residents in many ways. Using concepts from Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961), and Irwin (1970) as an analytic framework, several themes emerged and will be discussed in the following pages: the patterns of daily life in the institution; the threat of physical violence and damage to the psychological self; and, most importantly, the inmates’ adjustments to incarceration, their survival strategies, and the relationships that helped to sustain them.

Choices and Consequences: Life in a Juvenile Prison

When sent to the institution, young offenders were suddenly isolated from their families and friends, and from their home communities. The boys recognized the irony in the fact that they were isolated but, at the same time, never alone, forced to endure the company of other delinquents and various staff members. They faced sentences ranging from eight months to more than five years. Most in the Blue cottage would spend at least two of their teenage years in the institution. To survive in the juvenile prison, boys needed to quickly learn, understand, and follow the code of conduct shared by their fellow inmates and to adapt to the inmate subculture. It was perhaps the key ingredient to the experience of growing up behind bars.

There are two general schools of thought as to how and why the inmate subculture develops. Some scholars have suggested that the inmate subculture is of indigenous origin and develops in response to the specific conditions of confinement and the problems of adjustment posed by the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Cloward, 1960). Alternatively, Irwin and Cressey (1962) have ar-
gued that the inmate subculture is not unique to prisons at all. They claimed: “it seems rather obvious that the ‘prison code’—don’t inform on or exploit another inmate, don’t lose your head, be weak, or be a sucker, etc.—is also part of a criminal code, existing outside of prison” (p. 145). This position is referred to as the “direct importation” model; inmates’ personal identities and values are thought to shape the subculture (Feld, 1999, p. 295). The inmate culture in the training school of this study did not fit neatly into either model and seemed best described by a combination of the two. Feld (1999) discusses such a combination in his analysis of juvenile institutions:

Many adult and juvenile inmates are drawn from social backgrounds or cultures that emphasize toughness, manliness, and the protection of one’s own physical integrity. Preincarceration experiences equip in different ways inmates from diverse social, economic, criminal, racial, or sexual backgrounds to participate in violent subcultures within some institutions. Thus, a predisposition to violence among the inmate subculture also reflects influences of cultural importation which organizational features may aggravate or mitigate. (p. 296)

Feld’s general point fit the culture of this school nicely; it was to the Blue cottage’s credit, however, that while housing a population of predominantly violent offenders, violence and victimization were not everyday occurrences and, in fact, were relatively rare. While violent outbreaks and assaults were focal concerns for nearly all involved, the vigilance of the staff and the influence of well-established and well-regarded inmate leaders kept the cottage under control the majority of the time. Over the course of this study, less than a dozen assaults came to the attention of the Blue cottage staff.

In spite of the best efforts of staff members, however, the institution’s tough reputation was at least partially earned. Within its walls, the threat of violence was a real consideration on a daily basis (Bartollas, Miller, & Dinitz, 1976; Feld, 1977; Polsky, 1962). The young inmates were innovative in turning ordinary objects into weapons—they used balls from the cottage’s pool table (thought to be particularly effective when placed in a sock and swung), broken broom handles, or sharp pieces of metal when they felt the need to arm themselves. Within the cottage, kids generally tried to settle their disputes out of the sight of staff members in the relative privacy of the bathroom or laundry room. As they explained, the blows would rain fast and furious, and most
fights would be over in a minute or two. To hold any status with the other boys in the cottage, it was important for newcomers to watch their backs, to keep their mouths shut, and to not be “punked” or victimized.

The primary goal for the juveniles in this study was to survive their sentences, with as little harm or inconvenience as possible, and with their precariously formed adolescent identities intact. As Galtung (1961) explains:

Most prisoners are conscious of the fact that they are citizens of two worlds . . . painfully aware of the necessity of preserving an identity relevant for life outside when release comes. . . . Thus, time becomes essential and so important that it is almost considered a thing, concrete and materialized. . . . Detailed calculations as to amount of time left, and meditation on how that time could have been spent with the other identity, certainly are not bed-time reflections or once-an-hour thoughts. Concern for time seems to be an almost constant and painful state-of-mind. (p. 113)

Most of the boys in the Blue cottage did not expect to gain much from their time in the institution—they were growing up, but they did not feel like they were learning new skills or maturing as they might have if they were facing the challenges of life in the community. Many accepted their sentences as the consequence of their behavior, and they simply viewed their time in the institution as something to be endured, something they would find a way to survive.

**Adjusting to Incarceration**

As the state’s end-of-the-line training school, the institution’s tough reputation was widely known and many of the kids entered the institution wary and somewhat intimidated. One of the boys asked if that reputation influenced the choice in research subjects, posing the question: “Did you come here because it’s the toughest?” Most of the kids in the Blue cottage adjusted to life in the school pretty quickly, however, a testament to their own toughness and resilience. Most of them had made stops at other juvenile institutions on the way to ending up in the end-of-the-line training school. Once at this school, most of them found out that it was not as bad as they had feared. Because the population was older and generally more mature, some of the guys said that they actually liked this school better than other juvenile institutions in which they had done time.
Individuals decided relatively early on how they were going to spend their time. Irwin (1970) found three general modes by which inmates adapt to the deprivation and degradation of prison: jailing, gleaning and doing time. With jailing, Irwin argues that some inmates tend to make a world out of prison. Although certainly possible, it seems that this adaptation is relatively rare in juvenile institutions where the inmates know that they will be released in a matter of months or years. Staff members were concerned with the possibility of jailing or institutionalization, however, and they would warn boys in the cottage not to get too comfortable. When one staff member found out that some of the boys had caught field mice and were trying to keep them as pets, he made them get rid of them, reminding them that the juvenile prison was not their home.

It may be that jailing is in the future for some of the kids from the Blue cottage; Irwin (1970) suggests that jailing is the characteristic style of state-raised youth who go on to prison. Staff members, again, seemed concerned by this possibility and they made specific efforts to steer the kids in the cottage away from thinking of life in prison as a reasonable alternative. They would occasionally remind individuals that they would be “little fish” in a prison setting; their youth and good looks would not go unnoticed and they would likely be victimized by tougher inmates if they went on to prison alongside adults.

The second adaptation that Irwin (1970) describes is gleaning, in which individuals try to better themselves by taking advantage of the resources or programs available in the institution. Again, this was not a common adaptation in the Blue cottage, in part, because there were few real resources available to the young inmates. Most of the kids had not found school to be a useful or worthwhile endeavor when they were free; it seemed even less so when they were locked up. They had little respect for their teachers and many did not see the importance of a formal education in their own lives, valuing instead the savvy and hard-earned skills learned on the streets. The institution’s administration did not agree; the boys were required to go to school 220 days a year until they either graduated, earned their GED or turned 18 and gained the right to sign themselves out of school. Lacking resources, and with few motivated teachers or students, the school was not an ideal learning environment, but it did offer the boys a chance to see kids from other cottages, to work on computers, and to get out of their rooms for a while. The focus of the school program was on basic academics—many of these kids had dropped out of school and were severely behind. For those who did take school seriously and who hoped to pursue college
degrees, there were virtually no options for college-level work. A few kids showed interest in taking distance learning courses, but in order to do so, they were told they had to come up with the tuition and fees themselves. It was difficult for those who did not have families with the resources or the inclination to pay, so most ended up giving up on that goal.

For those kids who did make it through the basic academic program, the school scheduled small ceremonies for them when they graduated. Because the population was somewhat transitory, and because relatively few of the students graduated, most of the students marked their graduation in small, solitary ceremonies. The ceremonies took place in the institution’s cramped library, where perhaps thirty people could comfortably fit. In spite of the small scale, the school made an effort to make these individual ceremonies special. The graduate wore the traditional cap and gown in his choice of color and staff members took a few Polaroid pictures to commemorate the occasion. The graduates were allowed to invite their families, and all teachers and staff members who had built a relationship with the student were encouraged to attend. The principal presented the diploma, and teachers and staff shared stories and said a few words about the graduate and his progress. Punch and cake were provided and served, teachers returned to their classes, the staff to their positions, and the graduate would then go back to his daily routine. These small ceremonies were an interesting attempt to provide a glimpse of normalcy within the institution’s walls, to reward the young men who earned their diplomas with the chance to participate in the ritual and rite of passage of a traditional graduation.

Along with academics, the school also offered very limited vocational training. Although it seemed a rather odd choice for hard-core male offenders, cosmetology was the only vocational training offered. The boys who were enrolled, however, seemed to enjoy the training and they put their skills to good use. They would often braid each other’s hair in the cottage; the more talented students were sometimes allowed to travel between cottages to cut each other’s hair—even cutting staff members’ hair once in a while. Unfortunately, the training in cosmetology was apparently run by a single woman; when she left the institution, the program ended, leaving no opportunities for vocational training.

It might be argued that the residents were learning important traits in their jobs in the institution, but few of the inmate jobs taught viable skills. A few of the boys worked at the gym, helping with recreation; some worked in the kitchen; some worked in the laundry; a few were allowed to drive a small cart, transporting staff, teachers, and visitors...
around the campus; others worked helping the maintenance crew. While none of these jobs paid much (residents were paid one dollar a day for their work at the beginning of this study; by the end, they were given a raise to one dollar an hour for their labor), staff members and administrators seemed to view such work as a positive step, helpful in the residents’ treatment programs. A portion of the resident’s pay went towards his restitution; he was also required to save a certain percentage of his money to be given to him at release; he was allowed to spend the rest on canteen items or the occasional catalogue purchase (clothes, CDs, correspondence courses). Inmates were strictly forbidden from having cash or jewelry.

**Doing Time: Lives on Pause**

By far, the most common adaptation in the Blue cottage was what Goffman (1961) calls “playing it cool” and Irwin calls “doing time.” As Irwin (1970) describes it:

Many convicts conceive of the prison experience as a temporary break in their outside career, one which they take in their stride. They come to prison and “do their time.” They attempt to pass through this experience with the least amount of suffering and the greatest amount of comfort. They (1) avoid trouble, (2) find activities which occupy their time, (3) secure a few luxuries, (4) with the exception a few complete isolates, form friendships with small groups of other convicts, and (5) do what they think is necessary to get out as soon as possible. (p. 69)

Beyond time spent in school and work and the necessary “programming,” the main activities in the Blue cottage included watching television; playing pool and video games; playing cards and the occasional game of chess or dominoes; teasing each other and joking with the more friendly staff members; braiding each other’s hair; and thinking about the future. The residents often grew palpably bored, as the monotony of the same routine, the same faces day after day wore on them. They would frequently sit and watch mind-numbingly bad television, irritated that the staff would not allow them to watch music videos or Jerry Springer’s violent talk show. They would play the same video games again and again, attempting outrageous maneuvers to try to make them a little more challenging and a little more interesting, swearing colorfully at their own characters and their opponents. On weekends, the staff
would often rent a movie for them to watch, but even those movies held some insult, because they were not allowed to show R-rated films in a juvenile institution.

The stifling boredom of their claustrophobic daily lives lead to dependence on what Goffman (1961) calls “removal activities,” which offered some relief from the monotony of life in total institutions. The residents engaged in a number of forbidden removal activities, hiding their illicit behaviors from the staff. Smoking, gambling, and the use of illegal drugs were strictly against the rules of the institution and were the removal activities witnessed most frequently. Upon gaining their trust, residents spoke freely to the researcher about these subjects, and they would occasionally politely excuse themselves from conversations in order to go to their rooms to smoke a cigarette. One twenty-year-old rationalized his illicit behavior by explaining that he was addicted to tobacco and smoking and that it was unrealistic for the institution to expect inmates to quit cold-turkey. He thought that the institution could do more to help the residents with their addictions—perhaps supplying them with nicotine patches to make quitting smoking less painful. As it was, he explained, if inmates were able to get cigarettes, they would smoke them without worrying about the consequences.

Gambling, too, helped relieve the boredom for some of the guys. Spades was the card game of choice in the cottage (deemed by the staff as the “convict’s game”), and cheating was widely recognized as an important part of the way they played the game. Guys would make it more interesting by playing for more than their self-respect. The researcher witnessed at least one “high stakes” game of Spades, in which they were playing for twenty dollars cash—a very rare illicit commodity—and twenty dollars in canteen credit (used to purchase food and goods through the institution). On another occasion, a bored resident tried to convince some of the other guys to play a game with him, offering to handicap himself by playing with the researcher as his partner. There were no takers. Tyler, the cottage’s acknowledged best Spades player, was often recruited as a partner in these high stakes games, lending his skills without risking his own money.

The use of drugs was also an important illegal removal activity for many of the boys. Marijuana was the most accessible and the most commonly used drug in the institution; staff members and residents both spoke about kids smoking it. TJ, for example, explained one day that he would be happier the next weekend after he got his “visit marijuana,” implying that his guests would be smuggling it in to him. Once attained, there seemed to be liberal sharing of their stashes, especially between
roommates and close friends. Several of the guys talked about how marijuana was important in relieving the monotony of day after day in the institution. As Kody neared his release date, he said that he had been “smoking a lot of weed” to help pass the time. Others, including Tony and Marco, feared the consequences more than they valued the high, and they chose not to indulge as their release dates approached.

Members of the staff seemed to know about the cigarettes and the marijuana, but there was little they could realistically do about it. The majority of the staff of the Blue cottage chose to tolerate the smoking as long as it was not too blatant. Their biggest irritation came when boys who did not have lighters (strictly banned by the institution, although several of the residents had them) jammed the lead of pencils into the electrical outlets in their rooms—lighting their cigarettes but blowing the circuits in the cottage. The more vigilant staff members made active efforts to catch the guys with contraband, sometimes sneaking out to peer into the windows of their locked rooms from the outside. Even when they witnessed the boys with contraband, however, by the time they had made it back inside the cottage and unlocked the rooms, it was often difficult for the staff to find the evidence. The boys were fairly clever and creative at hiding their stashes. Kody, particularly, was an elusive smoker that some members of the staff were eager to catch and punish. The proof of his smoking was there in his scorched fingertips. But they never could catch him with contraband, for as Kody mildly explained, he “put it in his butt” whenever necessary.

As another preventive measure, the staff also gave the guys random urinalyses (UAs) to try to detect if they had recently done drugs or alcohol. If called for a UA after they had smoked marijuana, the residents would often “push water,” which meant drinking as much water as humanly possible before giving their urine samples. The lengths that they would go to in pushing water became a joke, even amongst the staff. Tyler, for example, would drink several 2-liter bottles of warm water in the hours before giving his sample. When asked if it helped, he claimed that he hadn’t had a “dirty” UA yet, although he had apparently had reason to be concerned. A staff member explained that some of the excessively watered-down urine samples were given special attention at the lab, but the boys believed it was their best bet for avoiding sanctions after smoking marijuana.

Once in a while, when the residents were out of the cottage at dinner or at the gym for recreation, the security staff would come in with a drug dog to check out certain rooms or to do a sweep of the cottage. On one of his visits, the dog closely checked TJ and Tyler’s room, “hitting on” a
dead potted plant. Security staff members, after agreeing that the plant was dead and thus beyond real damage, dumped the plant out and carefully sifted through the dirt looking for drugs, but they did not find anything. When they came back from dinner, TJ and Tyler were irritated to find that security had left their room a mess, and they complained loudly to the cottage staff. One staff member dryly commented that, “these guys forget they’re in prison,” and made the point that it wasn’t the staff’s responsibility to clean up the mess. TJ later explained to the researcher that he was at first worried that the dog might have found some of his stash, but after checking several of his hiding spots, he realized that the dog must have missed them. He then was able to relax and he and Tyler later admitted—with some humor—that their plant had not really been harmed as it was already beyond hope.

Another illicit activity in the cottage was getting new tattoos. Residents made tattoo guns out of the small motors in walkmans or tape players. The more talented artists, then, were chosen to create new tattoos for residents. At one point, Alex was the man who did most of the tattoos in the cottage and he had a tattoo gun hidden in his room. Some of his tattoos looked pretty professional, but the recipients still teased him about the “shitty” job he had done on particular aspects of the design. He shrugged off their critiques and took the ribbing with good-natured humor.

With the help of removal activities and a few friendly relationships built within the institution, most of the boys survived day-to-day life in the cottage without major incidents. On a larger scale, however, the boys were literally growing up and becoming adults during their sentences, and the time spent in the institution would leave an indelible mark on each of them.

Messing Up

Some of the boys, especially those who had “juvenile life,” were facing so much time that it was hard for them to think of the future or to stay motivated to “do good.” Many of them had already spent a large part of their adolescence locked up, and they found it difficult to find things to look forward to. In many cases, the frustration got to them, and boys who started off with relatively short stints of time found their sentences extended for assaults and escapes. Many kids talked about how they could have been out long ago, but they kept “fucking up” and getting into more trouble while in the institution. Goffman (1961) calls such behavior “messing up” and terms the subsequent punishment “getting busted.”
One of the residents, Ben, explained in a letter how his own sentence was extended:

I got locked up for a 2nd degree theft. I was only lookin’ at 21 to 28 weeks for this but they manifested me up to 65 weeks. I appealed that and they chopped off 10 weeks and by that time I had gotten 2 assault charges while at another institution. One for 103 to 129 weeks which was a 2nd degree assault and 30 to 40 weeks for a custodial assault. Then, last year I got a 4th degree assault on a resident. That was 8 to 12 weeks. (personal correspondence, 1998)

So, rather than getting out in one year, as his original sentence dictated, Ben kept messing up and ended up serving nearly four years.

Along with other forms of “messing up,” assaults were a constant concern within the institution. Horseplay was technically forbidden amongst the residents because the staff realized that it could quickly escalate into real fights. But the guys still managed to play around with each other and with the younger, friendliest staff members, wrestling, kicking, and hitting each other, mostly in fun. Sometimes the horseplay seemed to function as a test of one’s toughness—to see how much an individual could take without showing that it hurt. Two of the boys who were good friends frequently hit each other in the neck or kicked or slammed their fists into an accessible body part of the other in a playful, albeit painful, manner. The blows had to hurt, but they would just smile at each other and say, “Oh, all right . . .” and start looking for a chance to get the other back.

Relationships in the Cottage

Amidst the teasing and the horseplay, there was real friendship and affection between some of the boys as they shared aspects of their lives and their hopes with one another. They would tell stories about their past adventures and laugh together about their common experiences with drugs, alcohol and crimes. Some planned to remain friends long after they left the institution and they made detailed plans about the times and the escapades they would engage in and the experiences that they would share “on the outs.”

Some of the inmates also developed close relationships with members of the cottage staff. As they would phrase it, “some of the staff are cool, and some are assholes.” The latter they could do without, but they did like some of the staff members, appreciating the fact that they seemed to honestly care about them. Kody talked about having to “train
the staff,” but in truth the two groups had to learn to live together with some amount of give and take in order for the cottage to function smoothly. While there was some level of underlying tension between staff members and inmates in general, the boys felt particular animosity toward the more militant members of the staff who they felt had not yet earned their respect. Their dislike for authoritarian members of the staff worked to reinforce their appreciation for other staff members and their particular counselors when they took the time to listen to them and to try to come up with creative solutions, rather than just sanctioning them and running their daily lives rigidly by the book.

To some extent, their friends and the staff functioned as a surrogate family for the boys while they were locked up. Although many of them came from troubled homes, the boys often felt extremely high levels of frustration as they were forcibly disconnected from their families. If their mothers or brothers or sisters were having problems, they felt a sense of their own inadequacy at not being able to do anything. Boys would hang up from phone calls from members of their families and they would be visibly upset, sometimes very aggressive and looking to blow off steam. The staff members would watch for potential explosions, and try to diffuse them by talking calmly to the boys and trying to “de-escalate” the situation. The temper tantrums would end, but the frustration remained. Sykes (1958) would categorize such frustration as part of the deprivation of liberty:

The mere fact that the individual’s movements are restricted, however, is far less serious than the fact that imprisonment means that the inmate is cut off from family, relatives, and friends, not in the self-isolation of the hermit or the misanthrope, but in the involuntary seclusion of the outlaw . . . what makes this pain of imprisonment bite most deeply is the fact that the confinement of the criminal represents a deliberate, moral rejection of the criminal by the free community. (p. 65)

Such moral rejection may have a particularly devastating impact on adolescent offenders. In sharing part of their daily lives in the institution with them, it was clear that at times nothing could cut through the boredom, the anger, and the loneliness. These youth, troubled to begin with, often became more isolated and desperate, and less functional the longer they spent in the juvenile prison. As Ben explained in the personal correspondence referred to earlier, “I see how people get so lonely and hate society so much. At first I didn’t understand why people hate so
much. This is why. Imagine doing the same thing, exact same thing every day for four years. Pretty soon that’s all that person is gonna know how to do. That’s reality.”

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The boys in this study grew up in difficult circumstances and made choices that got them locked up. Through their incarceration in a state training school, the juvenile inmates in this study lost hope and opportunities without ever having much of either to begin with. While recent research suggests youthful offenders in Florida perceive “deep-end” juvenile justice placements to be more beneficial than either adult sanctions or low-end juvenile commitments (Lane et al., 2002), knowing there are worse alternatives is small comfort to boys living in a juvenile prison. Furthermore, the youths in Florida indicated that they were most influenced by the opportunities to increase their educational and job skills while in deep-end juvenile institutions; they also appreciated the programs’ reentry components which helped to place them in educational programs and jobs in the community (Lane et al., 2002, p. 440). Such opportunities were largely lacking in the training school in this study. Rather than providing a continuum of care and offering assistance to their residents as they reentered their communities, the policy of this training school was to “cut the cord” when the young men exited the razor wire fence and to hope for the best.

One of the central arguments for maintaining a separate juvenile justice system is the belief that youth are more malleable than their adult counterparts, and they have a better chance at being resocialized while in the institution and pointed toward more conforming futures. While virtually all correctional institutions are dangerous places, the real threat to incarcerated juveniles seems to be to the psychological self rather than the physical self, as “the wall which seals off the criminal, the contaminated man, is a constant threat to the prisoner’s self-conception” (Sykes, 1958, p. 67). It follows, then, that if they are still forming their self-concepts and their worldviews, it may be particularly damaging to juveniles to be locked away in institutions and cottages that are “delinquent-bound” (Polsky, 1962).

For many of the juveniles in this study, the inmate culture was virtually second-nature to them, as they had lived by an unwritten criminal code for most of their teenage lives. They came into the institution valuing toughness, respect, and the ability to “take it” (Irwin & Cressey,
1962; Miller, 1958). They had faced adversity in their lives and they had fought for their own survival. They accepted their stints in the training school with little struggle and they learned to play the system—saying what the administrators and staff wanted to hear in order to get out as soon and with as little hassle as possible. They understood the importance of doing their own time and letting others do theirs. Even as staff members strove to teach the boys conforming values and new ways to think about their lives and their choices, the beliefs and the values that led the boys into trouble and brought them into the training school in the first place were strongly reinforced by the inmate culture during their time in the institution. As Bortner and Williams (1997) explain in their study of a juvenile prison:

... prisons seem especially powerless to effect lasting change in youths’ lives. It is possible to lock youths in their cells, deny them basic needs and privileges, inflict pain upon their bodies, and engender humiliation and anger in their psyches. It is possible to get youths to espouse beliefs they do not hold or promise changes they will not make. But this does not amount to altering them or their futures. (p. 30)

Growing up is difficult under the best of circumstances—to spend those adolescent years behind bars raises the stakes immeasurably. The experiences adolescent inmates miss while incarcerated cannot be replaced; their teenage lives are part of the price paid for their crimes. The boys that entered the institution will return to their communities as young men, with all of the responsibilities of adulthood. It is a testimony to the strength and resiliency of these youths that they survive their sentences as well as they do and generally manage to leave the institution still holding at least some small hope for a better future. To build on that slim hope and to offer these former “problem children” legitimate opportunities and meaningful choices is perhaps the ultimate challenge facing juvenile justice agencies in the twenty-first century.

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Received: 08/17/2004
Revised: 02/27/2005
Accepted: 03/02/2005
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The author would like to thank Nathaniel J. Pallone, Howard S. Becker, her colleagues in the Department of Sociology at Oregon State University, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.