



Missouri Sets New Standard for Juvenile Detention

Innovative Facilities for Kid Criminals Are Short on Guards and Long on Hugs

By JOSEPH DIAZ

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For most of the nearly 100,000 kids in America's [juvenile justice system](#), life in prison means orange jumpsuits, barred cells and constant guard.

But the Waverly Regional Youth Center in Missouri is a [different kind of detention center](#). It's the home and hope for 44 boys already embarked on a life on crime. The walls are adorned with colorful posters and bulletin boards with [positive affirmations](#). Counselors and dormitories have replaced guards and cellblocks.

For over a year, "Primetime" lived alongside the kids to examine firsthand this radical take on juvenile justice. By taking some of the hard edges out of [juvenile corrections](#), the state of Missouri has chalked up results that have corrections experts across the country taking notice.

One juvenile inmate at Waverly, Chris, 14, looks like the kid next door -- but he spent the last few years drinking and doing drugs.

"I was also stealing cars," Chris said. "I was the 'bad ass' around town, nobody wanted to mess with me."

Chris' mother left when he was 11 months old and she's been in and out of prison ever since. He said he has no memory of her.

At Waverly, the inmates don't just do time [sitting in a cell](#); instead they are divided into small teams and undergo constant group therapy and emotional self-examination. Every evening, they hold a group meeting in a darkened room, where the boys feel safe to bare their secrets. One night, Kim Orear, a group leader, invited anyone in the group to "open up about some of the more shameful issues." Chris raised his hand and took a step that would change him forever.

'We're All Missing Something

Chris claimed his father abused him and said running away from the alleged abuse is what started him down the path of drugs and crime. "No matter what my dad did to me, I love my dad. He is my only parent that was there and didn't leave me," said Chris.

But the devastating claim had severe unforeseen consequences. He could no longer speak to his father, who denied the allegation. A state investigation later found the abuse unsubstantiated.

For days, Chris cried at his bunk, caught between his love for his father and his need to finally unburden himself and begin to heal. A fellow inmate, Dylan, stepped in to help soothe Chris by giving him a bunch of stuffed animals. "He's down and teddy bears make people happy. They're cuddly and soft," Dylan said.

Showing support and depending on one another are part of what Waverly teaches. "We're not alone. No matter

what we're going through, there is someone on another bunk going through the same thing," said Dylan. "We're all missing something in our lives and that's why we're here to get it back and fix it."

The counselors at Waverly say one of the most effective things they do here is something you never see in prison -- hugs.

"We will never replace the parent that never paid attention to them, but what we do is show them they are worthy of hugs," Orear said.

One hundred miles away, on a college campus in Fulton, Mo., is the Rosa Parks Center. The 10 girls there have committed crimes ranging from drug offenses to burglary and assault. Tye, 17, has been in and out of foster care since the age of 2, and has been convicted of multiple felonies. She told ABC News that her biggest hurdle is a volatile relationship with her mother, who rarely visits her.

"I felt really abandoned by her," Tye said. "I just have this hatred toward her. I think that is what holds me back."

At the Rosa Parks Center, as part of her treatment Tye recounted her drug history.

"At the age of seven was when I first smoked pot," she said. When she was in the fourth grade, Tye said, she began taking her mother's prescription pills and selling them because there wasn't enough food in the house. At 10, she started using meth and cocaine.

The Future of Juvenile Justice?

For Tye, Rosa Parks is her first stable environment. Although there are no guards or even fences at Rosa Parks, there are very few escapes. In fact, fewer than 50 kids a year abscond from Missouri's 32 residential facilities. "Rosa Parks becomes part of your family," one girl said. "You don't want to betray them."

Tye summed up the difference between Missouri facilities and other juvenile prisons, comparing the kids' problems to invasive weeds. "Other placements want to cut off the weed," she said. "Here, you get down to the root and they try to pull them out, because you can't kill it unless everything is gone."

Surprisingly, all the intensive therapy of the Missouri system actually costs less than other juvenile systems. The cost per child in Missouri, \$50,000 a year, is about half the national average.

Twenty-five years ago, Missouri changed the way it looked at juvenile corrections because, officials say, the familiar model -- large prisons and boot camps -- was failing.

"The conditions for young people weren't safe, [they] weren't getting any better and were going out and repeating [the same] behaviors if not worse," said Tim Decker, director of the state's Division of Youth Services (DYS).

The new program has shown success. Only 10 percent of the kids in Missouri's juvenile jails end up in adult prison within three years, according to the DHS. In other states, that number is as high as 40 percent.

Recent reports about excessive violence against juvenile inmates have renewed calls for a national overhaul of the system. Does Missouri's model have the answer to America's broken juvenile justice system? Or are they just coddling children, as some critics say?

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