Responses to Incarceration: a Qualitative Analysis of Adolescents in Juvenile Detention Centres

EMMA OGILVIE & MARK LYNCH[*]

Introduction

It is something of a criminological given that correctional practices impact upon individuals in negative and counter-productive ways. The experience of incarceration is widely seen as leading to engagement in violent, disruptive, self-injurious or 'deviant' behaviour by prisoners (Hudson 1996). The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of this nexus between correctional practices and the responses of adolescents to these practices. Our research suggests that the behaviours of incarcerated young people are very much more than simple 'responses' to institutional 'stimuli'. Central to the behaviours of incarcerated adolescents is the *active* construction of a sense of self-identity that can resist any efforts by the institution to 're-shape' and 'reduce' the individual. This active process can be contrasted with the *reactive* processes central to so much penological research (see Melossi 2000). In elaborating our particular perspective, we will focus upon three discrete (albeit related) issues. These issues are first, the nature of the links with the outside world, second, the 'voluntary' nature of incarceration, and third, the importance of 'attitude'. Before turning to the three issues at the heart of this paper, we need to 'set the scene' a little more comprehensively, by considering briefly the implications of race, gender, marginalisation and incarceration with respect to the construction of adolescent self-identities.

Gender, Race and Incarceration

When considering the characteristics of young people who are imprisoned, one of the most obvious factors we have to note is the well-documented over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian correctional institutions. In Queensland, Indigenous youths aged between 10 and 16 years constitute 46.8 per cent of all detention orders (Families, Youth and Community Care 1999). Similar findings have also been found in other states (Atkinson 1999; Beresford & Omaji 1996; Gale, Bailey-Harris & Wundersitz 1990). A variety of factors have been identified as responsible for this over-representation. These factors are widely recognised as associated with the nature of European colonisation, and include poverty, marginalisation, and racial discrimination (Beresford & Omaji 1996; Cunneen 1990, 1994; Cunneen & McDonald 1997; Gale et al 1990; O'Connor 1994).

* Postdoctoral Fellow, Criminology Research Council, Australian Institute of Criminology; Principal Research Officer, Research and Prevention Division, Queensland Criminal Justice Commission.

Just as stark as the Indigenous over-representation is the fact that males are approximately ten times more likely to be incarcerated than females (particularly with respect to Aboriginal males). This differentiation by gender (with race as a 'multiplier') is a longstanding feature of the criminal justice system (Carrington 1993; Chesney-Lind 1997; Johnson & Scheuble 1991; Worrall 1990) and indicates the importance of understanding the relationship between masculinity and criminality.

The argument that crime is (at times at least) an aspect of processes of masculinity development and maintenance, is not new, having been argued from the days of Lombroso through to the more empirically grounded work of Cohen and Sutherland & Matza. In more recent times, the notion of masculinity and criminality being connected has notably been argued by Katz (1988), Messershmidt (1994, 1995), White (1990), Allen (1988, 1989) and Polk (1994). The arguments these criminologists advance emphasise the importance of understanding criminality as a 'tool' for the development and maintenance of a particular expression of masculinity. For example, Messerschmidt examines the construction of different criminal masculinities within the school environment. He argues that 'white, middle class, youth masculinity is accomplished differently in separate and dissimilar social situations' (1994:89). Within environments such as the school, where the authoritarian structure discourages creativity, independence and autonomy (1994:88), an *accommodating* masculinity is developed which is controlled, rational and aimed at economic success. Outside of school, however, an *opposition* masculinity, which involves engaging in (usually) trivial delinquency, is employed (1994:90).

Theoretical distinctions of this type are useful because they highlight the extent to which cultural factors are implicated in the construction of particular forms of adolescent masculinity associated with trajectories involving conflict with the criminal justice system.

Messerschmidt summarises this point by arguing that, 'collectively, young men experience their everyday world *from a specific position in society* and so they construct differently the cultural ideals of masculinity' (1994:98 emphasis added). What we need to understand, then, is how different groups incorporate and negotiate particular aspects of masculinity in ways that take account of differences in social position, degrees of access to resources, opportunities for the exercise of agency and situational contexts.

Understanding the consequences of incarceration for males is therefore critical, however, this is not to say that the experience of incarceration for females is irrelevant. Indeed, given the relative lack of research into investigating females in incarceration, specifically young females, this is an area requiring more systematic attention than has been the case to date (see Alder & Baines 1996).

The limited research that has focussed upon young women in detention centres draws attention to some important concerns. For example, both Kersten (1990) and Alder (1998) have noted that, in spite of their less harmful behaviours, girls are consistently seen as being 'more difficult' to handle. This perception derives on the one hand from the particularities of female expressions of self-identity and criminality, and, on the other hand, from the ways in which treatment patterns and institutional policies impact upon young females in a manner that is not the case for young males.

Just as criminality may serve as a 'tool' for constructing masculinity, so may it also serve as a means of constructing particular types of feminine identities. However, these feminine criminal identities (as with masculine criminal identities) cannot be understood in uni-dimensional ways. Instead, they need to be understood in the context of the very wide range of ways in which structural factors can become implicated in identity construction processes. Both

feminist theory in particular, and criminological theory more generally, has increasingly come to argue the importance of understanding the complicated nature of gender, particularly as it intersects with issues of race, class and marginalisation. Theorists such as Carrington (1993) have argued that *essentialist* notions of gender, class and ethnicity are unhelpful when attempting to explain the interactions between young girls and the criminal justice system. Maher (1997) also critiques those theoretical approaches which privilege social class as the crucial variable in explaining pathways to poverty, arguing that they 'fail to elucidate relations among people who ostensibly share a class position' (1997:170). Instead, Maher offers a framework for understanding how not only socio-economic disadvantage, but also gender and ethnicity 'underpin the organisation of labour markets in the street-level drug economy' (1997:171). Similarly, Miller (1998) provides a comprehensive analysis of the manner in which gender and marginalisation can impact upon female robbers. Miller argues that while men and women may have similar motives for engaging in robbery, the 'gender stratified street setting' that women find themselves in forces them to enact the crime in a distinctly different manner.

The importance of these theorists lies with their demonstrations of the multiplicity of disadvantages that can impact upon young women and men as a result of gender, class, race, and the complicated ways that these factors intersect in situations of marginalisation (see Schwartz & Milovanovic 1996). These 'intersections' are important for both females and males in terms of the experience of incarceration. However, whilst many of the experiences of young females and males in incarceration are similar, there are also aspects to incarceration that are gender specific in their impacts. Before turning more directly to these impacts, the more general issue of the ways in which incarceration can be implicated in self-identity construction needs to be briefly addressed.

Imprisonment and the Construction of 'Self'

Whilst gender, race and criminality have been extensively covered in the criminological literature, the issue of imprisonment as an important site for identity construction processes (be that femininity/masculinity, cultural identity, racial identity etc.) in adolescence has been much less well investigated. While there are a number of critical studies examining the complex way in which contact with the juvenile justice system impacts upon subsequent constructions of 'self' for adolescents (see Borowski & O'Connor 1999; Carrington 1993; Cunneen 1994; Cunneen & White 1995; O'Connor & Sweetapple 1988), there has been surprisingly little substantive research focussing specifically on young people in detention and what incarceration means for their sense of self-identity[1]. This point notwithstanding, the more general studies that have been conducted are critically important in terms of our understandings of the complex nature of young people's capacity for exercises of agency. For example, O'Connor & Sweetapple's (1988) study of children and court practices is a good example of qualitative research that illustrates how young people are constantly positioned as powerless because of the 'structural imbalance inherent in modern society' (O'Connor & Sweetapple 1988:120). Importantly, O'Connor & Sweetapple note that in listening to what adolescents were actually saying it was clear that these adolescents did not in fact consider themselves to be 'oppressed'. Critically, however, O'Connor & Sweetapple go on to argue that expressions by adolescents of 'agency' need to be understood with reference to the realities of these young people's lives. These are lives characterised by violence, poverty and marginalisation.

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1   It should be noted here that one consistent exception to this trend is the research conducted by Christine Alder, University of Melbourne, who has focused upon the experiences of young women in *all* areas of the juvenile justice system.

Carrington (1993) makes a similar point in her analyses of criminal girls. By discarding simple dichotomies of females 'doing' crime equals 'feminine' crime, (as well as acknowledging that it is not just a case of girls being treated more leniently or more harshly than males), Carrington allows for the fact that the ways in which males and females are dealt with by, and respond to, the welfare and justice systems are simultaneously both ambiguous and contradictory. Girls may at times enjoy crime and may see 'street culture as a site of pleasure and not just exploitation' (Carrington 1993:103). In addition, these adolescents may, at times, clearly recognise the lack of consistency characterising the welfare and justice systems that intrude so deeply into their lives.

Because incarceration represents one of the very deepest intrusions the state can make upon the life of an adolescent, it is highly unfortunate that so few detailed studies have focussed upon this aspect of the juvenile justice system. If we wish to address this lacuna, we need to understand the impact of imprisonment upon identity construction in general, together with the implications of these impacts on marginalised young people in particular. By way of making a start on such an exercise, it useful to remind ourselves of the way in which penologically-oriented criminology has developed over time. With the benefit of hindsight, we can recognise a series of distinct and decisive phases. Of particular relevance is the movement from the 'total institutions' of Goffman (1961), to the disciplinary control and bio-power of Foucault (1979), to the dispersal of social control notion advanced by Cohen (1979). Increasingly, however, modern prisons are being understood as mechanisms primarily oriented towards the identification and management of vulnerable and 'troublesome' groups, rather than being oriented towards the more traditional goals of 'punishment' or 'rehabilitation' (Feeley 1992). Crucially however, and irrespective of whatever the 'real' purpose of incarceration might be, there is general acceptance of the notion that prisons are institutions of social control that impact upon individuals' sense of self in coercive and all too frequently negative ways.

Incarceration is typically understood in a 'reactionary' sense, whereby individuals are viewed as reacting to imprisonment in terms of particular modes of interaction and ritualised behaviours. This approach is commonly understood as the *deprivation* model. The classic examples of this approach are provided by Irwin & Cressey (1962) with their analyses of inmate culture.

Very occasionally, these deprivation models have argued that the construction of a particular form of emphasised masculinity represents an *adaptation* to the subordinating impact of incarceration. Thus early theorists (Clemmer 1958; Sykes 1958; Cohen & Taylor 1972) all identified particular groups as constructing 'real man' personas in response to the deprivations of liberty, autonomy, personal security and heterosexuality entailed in incarceration (Ditchfield 1990).

There are those, however, who do not accept the notion of any overwhelming impact of social institutions in the determination of inmate identities, arguing instead for an *importation* model of social order within prison (see Jacobs 1977). Within this framework, inmates are viewed as bringing important elements of their 'outside' culture into prison with them. While the social factors that inmates import include essentially demographic factors such as socio-economic status (SES) and the like, for the purposes of this project, issues of gender and race are particularly pertinent. It was with these understandings in mind that theorists such as Jacobs (1979) first began to argue that the emergence of movements such as the Black Muslim movement was significantly implicated in the 'racial cleavages' observed in American prisons. Jacobs argued that 'the Black Muslims actively proselytised preaching a doctrine of black superiority. They imported the spirit of 'black nationalism'

into the prisons which drew upon the frustration and bitterness of black prisoners, and provided organisational and ideological tools for challenging the authority of white prison officials' (Jacobs 1979, cited in Genders & Player 1989). Again, these are major issues in the field of theoretical criminology that are likely to yield useful insights in the Australian context.

However, to date, research studies concerned with young people's experiences of incarceration have uniformly focused upon the deprivation models of adaptation. The reasons for this are not difficult to understand. Given issues such as the over-representation of Indigenous people at all levels of the criminal justice system (Cunneen & McDonald 1997:18-41), the fact that Indigenous youth are over-represented at a rate that exceeds that of Indigenous adults (Atkinson 1999:407), and the abuse of children in detention (Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children 1999), notions of incarceration being in some way *chosen* by Indigenous youth as an aspect of the construction of culturally 'appropriate' identities are, at best, gauche, and at worst, racist.

Prisons are undeniably powerful social settings that have a decisive impact upon the construction and/or maintenance of social identities. If an individual's most defining experiences of growing up are primarily based within a prison environment, it would seem unlikely that such experiences will equip that individual for a life removed from criminal sub-cultures. In addition, and crucially, we cannot shy away from acknowledging that some individuals may well be relatively 'at ease' with the world of prison because 'they have been brought up with family members in prison. It holds no fear for them. It's meeting up with family' (interview in Beresford & Omaji 1996:117). These are important issues because, to the extent that this is the case, arguments about the *deterrent* effect of detention are beside the point. As a corollary, the expenditures involved in incarceration need to be reconsidered with reference to facilitating less destructive modes of 'growing up' rather than attempting to give substance to overly optimistic notions of the rehabilitative potential of incarceration. These issues will be returned to later in the paper.

Methodology

This paper draws upon the qualitative phase of a large research project, the *Sibling Study*, examining the determinants of juvenile delinquency. The Sibling Study is a longitudinal project examining the causes of juvenile delinquency. It utilises a 65 page questionnaire comprising more than 500 variables, examining a variety of social factors implicated in criminality.

Unstructured qualitative interview techniques were also utilised, particularly with respect to the 'serious offenders' in two Queensland juvenile detention centres. These interviews were voluntary and initially conducted following completion of the questionnaire, with 57 respondents engaging in this first interview. These interviews were an important aspect of the process of gaining the trust of respondents and establishing rapport (see Ogilvie 1999). From this larger group a smaller sample of thirty inmates, fifteen girls and fifteen boys agreed to participate in a series of in-depth interviews. Repeated, in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with these thirty 'serious' offenders. These interviews typically took about two and half-hours at a time, with most respondents being interviewed between two and fifteen times over the three-month period.

The interviews were semi-structured, being based loosely around the structure of the quantitative instrument, but also being open to different directions initiated by the respondents themselves. With respect to obtaining contextual information, the respondents were treated 'as a witness who can report on the events being studied' (Wright & Bennett 1990:142). It is important to note at this point that one of the central issues to be considered in researching youth in general, and marginalised, disadvantaged youth in particular, is that of ethics. As Wexler (1990) notes:

> While ethical obligations are an important aspect of any social science inquiry, they hold particular salience for criminologists because of the sensitivity of the topics under investigation. The vulnerability of those studied, as well as the potential vulnerability of those conducting such studies, calls for an understanding of the nuances and complexities of the ethical criteria of social research (Wexler 1990:79).

The ethical concerns of relating to interviewing young people in detention are obviously many and varied, and have been dealt with in more detail previously (Ogilvie 1999). It does need to be noted however that confidentiality was assured and the voluntary nature of any participation in the research made clear. Pseudonyms have been used in the write-up and respondents have not been matched with either the original survey instrument or with official statistics and so cannot be identified by any government agency/body.

Links with the Outside World

One of the common-sense defining characteristics of places of incarceration is that links to the outside world are cut. It is argued that inmates are separated from the outside world and forced to conduct their lives constrained by rules, restrictions and regulations (Goffman 1961). However, with respect to adolescents and juvenile detention centres, this perception denies the social bonds that are such a distinguishing feature of delinquent subcultures. Delinquent subcultures are not confined to detention centres, nor to the streets of the outside world but rather are interwoven between these two worlds (Jacobs 1977; Ogilvie & Lynch 1999). This is not to say that incarcerated subcultures are influenced solely by street subcultures or even that it is simply a matter of inmates bringing a particular culture into prison with them (Irwin & Cressey 1962:142). Rather, it is the case that the two subcultures, street and institution, are constantly interacting because each culture is constantly forced to accept the reality and influence of the other. Communication with friends and relatives on the outside, as well as those in other centres, is a permanent and vital aspect of life in detention. Detainees are well aware of what is going on in other arenas of their lives, including activities of their friends and relatives outside, activities of their peers in other wings of the centre, or indeed in other juvenile detention centres altogether. Information such as who has slept with whom, who has committed the latest offence, who is planning on breaking out and so on are communicated through a complicated mechanism of visits, phone calls, new arrivals, and conversations with social workers and Correctional Services Officers. As soon as this information has reached an inmate it is quickly circulated via the other residents and so ultimately forwarded to the appropriate person. This was frequently seen in casual conversations, such as Natasha discussing a visit from her boyfriend:

> thing is, he reckons he saw Alec (*Natasha's younger brother*) over at the drop-off centre (*local dealers house*) and so the little shit is trying to make himself a name. He's only eleven hey! And he knows I'd go right off at him if I was home, so he's using his opportunity... Not that he'd be using or nothing, he's just be hanging out, doing runs and stuff, but it's so dangerous, and I'll freak if he gets in trouble... So I've asked Anthony if he can do anything, he use to know those guys and he'd never let anyone, you know, take advantage.

Or Brian discussing his brother, who was in an adult correctional centre:

> Nah, I just heard my brother's been bashed, pretty bad. Some guy reckoned he owed him some money, for gear yeah, and Staffy, he's gone off the stuff hey. Seriously. Trying to get himself clean cause he's due out in another two months, wants to set up house with the girlfriend and all. But it was like an old debt, and the guy knew he was leaving soon, so tried to pull him in. It got pretty bad and it looks like he might get more points. Mum will be furious hey, looks like I'll be home before he is now.

Given that the commonplace view of prisons and detention centres is that they are specifically designed to represent a 'barrier to social intercourse with the outside and [the] departure is often built directly into the physical plant' (Goffman 1961:1) the porous nature of this 'barrier' in juvenile detention centres is challenging. Goffman claims that institutions such as prisons create and maintain a tension between the home world and the institutional world in order to manage inmates. The result of this tension is that 'inside' is rendered meaningless and is therefore always positioned in opposition to 'getting out' (1961:23-24). However, life within a detention centre is never so neatly dichotomised. Life on the inside is intimately connected with life on the outside and *vice versa*. Far from being two separate spheres operating in opposition to one another, there are two connected spheres. Links to the outside world are sufficiently comprehensive that detainees readily experience being inside as 'differently meaningful' rather than 'meaningless'. This is an important distinction. In a very real sense the detainees take the outside world with them when they are incarcerated and then devote considerable time and energy into ensuring that their links with the outside world are preserved and, wherever possible, strengthened.

These links with the outside world are important given that 'the loss of relationships with persons outside the walls ...[is] the most severe deprivation associated with long term imprisonment' (Flanagan 1980:148). It is official policy to forbid interaction with known offenders (i.e. friends) and also constrain interactions with family and visitors whilst within detention. It is hardly new to note that these practices frequently have as many detrimental as beneficial consequences (Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children 1999; Gostin & Staunton 1985:83). Two specific examples of ways in which attempts at limiting the nature of the links with the outside can prove disadvantageous can usefully be cited here. The first example involves a group of three detainees, a young female in a juvenile detention centre, a young male in a separate all male juvenile detention centre, and an adult woman incarcerated in an adult gaol. These three were close friends who had engaged in criminal activities together previously. They were all forbidden from interacting with one another but nevertheless maintained communication through a variety of informal channels. Given the nature of the transmission of gossip, however, some of this information was flawed by the time it had percolated through the system. The end result of this misinformation was that the young male came to believe that the adult woman, whom he regarded as a sister, was to be incarcerated for far longer than was actually the case. As noted by the younger girl:

> we all thought she'd been done hey, I mean she was in the Courier, and the judge actually said she deserved to serve the maximum time, we all thought she'd be waiting on her majesty.

Upon the boy's release he immediately engaged in an armed robbery, his explanation being that, 'it wasn't any use being out if she wasn't'. The boy was caught and sentenced for the robbery, returning to the same detention centre, and the adult female was subsequently released within the normal probationary period.

The second example is related to the control of outside visits. Because of security concerns with transporting detainees and the transmission of drugs, visits with family members were markedly curtailed during our research within the juvenile detention centre. One Maori boy,

who appeared to genuinely appreciate the spell in detention as a 'time to think', found visits with his family cut in terms of both the number permitted and the time allocated for each visit. These gatherings were particularly important to him because they involved a ritualised prayer and eating process, which had become central to his 'working himself out'.

> The whole family comes, my mum and dad, and my sisters when they can, and my grandfather sits at the head, serving the manya. He's the one who leads, and we go through, step by step, giving thanks and eating and that. They're all really into it, and you leave, I don't know, just feeling calm and together, knowing that you've served another week and you can do the next one the same.

With the curtailment of these visits the boy became cynical and 'stroppy', as did other detainees similarly affected by the limitations. Given the previous role of the young Maori boy as one of the more 'level headed' adolescents able to subdue the violence of many of the other youths, an atmosphere of unrest and potential aggression quickly became more prevalent and more firmly entrenched.

These examples are important because they highlight not only the impossibility of creating a 'total' institution (Goffman 1961) but also the sometimes disadvantageous consequences of attempts to curtail contacts with significant others. Far from creating a manageable situation of de-individualisation, such a strategy can engender cynicism, unrest, and the potential for violence and further offending.

The 'Voluntary' Nature of the Institution

In general, issues of being sentenced to, or released from, detention are considered relatively predetermined. Individuals commit certain acts defined by society as illegal and considered serious enough to warrant detention. These persons are then incarcerated by the state to be released at a set time. Youth detention is generally a final option that is only taken up by the authorities when all other non-custodial options have been exhausted. Notions of incarceration entailing voluntary elements are not commonly considered by criminologists (for exceptions see Banks et al 1975; Laycock 1977). There are, however, two separate yet important factors to be considered with respect to the voluntary nature of youth detention. Firstly, there is the issue of 'entry' and secondly the issue of 'exit' (particularly when the exit is escape). During the qualitative phases of the Sibling Study, it became plain that it was not at all uncommon for adolescents to deliberately set out to choose the timing of both their entry and exit from the institution. Their reasons for doing this were for the most part practical and rational

In the case of 'entry', it is commonly assumed that detention centres, like gaols, are institutions where entry is involuntary. One is sent there against one's will, in order to be punished for one's actions. In arguing against this view, we are not offering 'far right' explanations that adolescents want to be imprisoned because it is an easy rort nor 'far left' explanations that juvenile detention centres provide a better homelife than marginalised adolescents' 'poor/ dysfunctional' families are equipped to offer. Irrespective of the extent to which elements of these views may or may not be present in individual instances, such perspectives potentially hinder any useful appreciation of what is actually happening in the immediate foreground of juvenile detention centres. From the point of view of the adolescents, it is issues of trust, loyalty and solidarity that are paramount and finally determine the ways in which incarceration impacts upon them. Irwin & Cressey long ago noted that notions such as 'criminals should not betray each other to the police, should be reliable and wily but trustworthy and cool-headed etc' (Irwin & Cressey 1962:146) are attributes of both convict (prison) subcultures and thief (criminal) subcultures.

Given the importance of such issues as trust between young offenders, there are frequently genuine concerns on their part with respect to 'leaving friends behind' in detention. Many respondents were extremely concerned as to how their friends or relatives would cope on their own in a juvenile detention centre. As noted by Brooke:

> I've got another three months, so long as they don't try and slap some more on me in the meantime, but Mel, she's looking at another 10 years. I don't know what she's going to do. All her family lives way out at Watalya, so they can't get here to see her, and I won't be allowed to visit, ex-crim and all. I'm really worried about her hey, she really hates being inside and I could see that if she does get sentenced, she'll just give up.

And Melanie:

> It's hard hey, I mean, these guys become your family while you're in, and it's like you're just leaving them, saying 'I'm out... Screw you'. You feel really bad about it, and you know some of them come straight back inside because of that.

Alternatively, given the tendency for institutions, of all types, to produce cliques which serve to protect and nurture their members, the loss of significant 'players' affects those inside considerably. The result is that some adolescents may quite deliberately commit offences such as assaulting a police officer or stealing a car knowing that this means a very high likelihood of quickly being arrested and returned to detention and, in turn, maintaining the friendship groups of importance to them. This attitude is heightened by the rivalries that invariably develop between cliques. One example of this is that when there appeared to be the prospect of an arranged fight occurring within the centre, several girls attempted to be arrested so that they could be inside when it took place:

> *Brooke discussing an escalating confrontation between two other girls:* They've set a time hey, and they're trying to bring everyone in, it's like these two families are all being brought into it, Renae's calling in her cousins from J block, and Shayne's got her whole family involved from back in Dalayle. Apparently Shosannah (Shayne's sister) hit a police officer outside of the Darra, deliberately trying to get back inside in time hey, but the guy wouldn't arrest her, cause he reckoned he knew was she was trying to get up to.

And Renae discussing the same proposed incident:

> Nah, it's all just stupid. She's trying to show staunch but she'd just better sleep awake at night, she ain't going to be popular in here... She says she's got her family coming inside, and that they're going to go after my cous down in Oxley ... I don't know what she thinks they're going to do, they'll be backing me before they'll let anyone hurt my cous'.

The motivation in this case did not appear to be just the desire to take part in what promised to be a particularly violent incident (which incidentally did not result in taking place) but the shared knowledge that one never abandons friends in times of conflict.

This issue of loyalty to friends was also offered as the explanation for why it was not uncommon for individuals to assume responsibility for offences they had not in fact committed. Admitting to a crime committed by a friend was viewed by many youths as a perfectly reasonable expression of the friendship; 'you do it for them and they do it for you'. As stated by Shayne in accepting someone else's charges:

> Shosannah's having a bad time right now, I didn't figure she should be in, and the police didn't care hey. She'd do the same for me; she just needs a break.

The adolescents fully appreciate that 'doing crime means doing time' and they are well aware that the choices that they make will almost certainly result in a period of incarceration. Consequently, being incarcerated does not generally come as some unwelcome and unexpected shock to the system. Most of the adolescents interviewed had a very clear

understanding of what being incarcerated would be like long before they entered the institution, it being perceived as a 'logical progression and anticipated outcome of their prior activities' (Asher 1995). In addition, because the adolescents typically commit far more offences than they are ever apprehended for, and then use the 'clear up' option to reduce the number of offences they are ultimately charged with, there is a real sense on their part of being 'way ahead of the game' even if they do admit to someone else's offence.

> Nah, I haven't done too bad, three months, for some theft, some B and E's. I mean, I'd prefer to be out, don't get me wrong, but three months ain't too bad for the money I've made (Dylan).

Or as Leon noted when complaining about the fact that he'd been charged with offences he hadn't committed:

> Yeah, thing is, if I didn't admit, they'd have stayed on me until they got more, and I was just too worried hey. Better to serve on property, and have some favours owed when you're out, than be caught for what you had been up to.

While in a sense this perception by the adolescents is an accurate summation of their experiences with the criminal justice system, it should not be thought that they are entirely without blinkers of their own. The young people interviewed frequently had a very poor appreciation of precisely what they had been sentenced for, what legal procedures they could expect to confront, and precisely how long they could expect to be detained.

Just as entry into detention is not straightforward, the issue of exiting detention is similarly complex. This is particularly so with respect to escape. The notion that an inmate is forced into a confined space for a set period of time denies the fact that these individuals have a very acute sense of how, when and where to escape if they so choose. Many of the adolescents interviewed scorned the idea that to be inside for such a long period of time must become unbearable. They frequently argued that their incarceration was a matter of their 'own choice' and if they wanted to get out they could. Whilst the stance obviously reflects a degree of face-saving machismo, they nevertheless described in some detail the escape routes available within the centre. For a variety of reasons most of the adolescents argued that they had decided to stay in the centre until the end of their sentence. These reasons included not leaving their friends, wanting time to think, having nowhere to go and not wanting to have to put up with 'the crap' involved in being on the run. During the three-month period we were situated at the detention centres, we became well acquainted with the most obvious escape routes. The most favoured route was, in fact, employed by a number of adolescents in the final month of our interviews.

Two examples are pertinent at this point. One individual escaped for one night simply in order to spend his birthday with his girlfriend. While this escape occurred before being interviewed, he described his reasons for it afterwards as:

> I just needed to see her, it was my birthday, and I'd got my points down, and it was only one day, and it just seemed really important. I know it doesn't seem to make sense, I've lost my privileges and am back in H wing and all that, but it was just really important that I be out on that day. I knew I'd be back inside the next, I wasn't gonna run to Brazil or nothing, I just had to be with her on my birthday, and so I was.

Most apposite is the case of another boy who absconded after his girlfriend escaped from a different detention centre. Understandably he wanted to be with his girlfriend (although an alternative argument could be put forward in this particular case that he didn't want his girlfriend being outside without his awareness of what she was up to; see Ogilvie 1999). However, he was quickly caught and returned to detention whereupon his girlfriend gave herself up, commenting that it 'wasn't much fun being out when he wasn't'. Both adolescents received additional sentences for their absconding.

These examples are mentioned because they draw attention to the adolescents' perspective. While none of the adolescents believed they could stay on the run for more then a couple of months, they all considered escape to be an option that they could either choose or reject. Clearly what is important here is the exercising of the capacity for choice by the adolescents, within the arena of containment and restriction imposed by the state.

Attitude

The final issue to be considered here is the very significant role of 'attitude'. As already noted, the adolescents in detention are not confined within a world cut off from the outside by the walls of the juvenile detention centre. The adolescents are able to communicate widely with the outside world and exercise a degree of choice concerning their periods of incarceration. This contributes to a particular attitudinal orientation toward the juvenile detention centre that needs to be understood. For the adolescents, they often accept a period of incarceration for reasons that are important to them personally. Because they commit criminal offences for which they are well aware they risk being locked up, there is a strong sense on the part of the young people that they provide the 'meal ticket' for a wide range of correctional service officers, social workers and family service officers. This results in many of the staff being viewed with contempt by the adolescents. Some staff members were regarded as nothing more than 'losers from the straight world' who would be unemployable in any other context. The adolescents were aware of how much the various officers were paid for what they considered to be a 'cushy' job, requiring little more than a willingness to play sport, play computer games, watch videos and supervise meals. In short, the adolescents saw it as the staff's job to 'put up with their shit' if they wanted to earn their keep.

> Shit you know, what do they do? Organise bingo, watch videos, play a game of touch. And for this they get paid 35 grand a year? I mean, they earn that 'cause they're dealing with 'dangerous' criminals, so we just let them deal with them everyone now and then, you know, lose it every now and then, throw something about, make them earn their money.

Similarly if the adolescents desire something such as day release or to watch videos late at night, they understood very clearly the 'suck up' mechanisms they would need to employ in order to manipulate the appropriate officer into agreeing. As Irwin & Cressey state, 'status is to be achieved by the means made available in the prison, through the displayed ability to manipulate the environment, win special privileges in a certain manner, and assert influence over others' (Irwin & Cressey 1962:147). In regard to manipulating the environment, a number of the girls interviewed knew that a particular officer would always respond favourably if they acted cute and sweet and complimented her on her appearance[1]. Similarly, a particular male officer liked to be 'one of the gang' so the girls let him talk about his background and how similar it was to theirs. This process was regarded as a necessary, if somewhat tiresome, game (see also McDermott & King 1988). It is also important to recognise that many of the supervisors involved themselves in very similar processes of 'sucking up' to the juveniles in order to manipulate the situation to their advantage (McDermott & King 1988:363). 'Sucking up' by staff is an accepted aspect of daily life for incarcerated adolescents and, while they may well take it into account in their own manipulations of the system, it contributes to a deep-seated cynicism on their part about juvenile detention centres and their staff.

Policy Implications

The key factor central to the three issues discussed is that of personal agency. We are not the first to suggest that a range of behaviours can be used by incarcerated adolescents in order to restore a sense of autonomy and 'self', and so combat the repressive quality of the institution (see, for example, Asher 1995). Many behaviours such as aggression, withdrawal and manipulation can be viewed as 'normal, adaptive and predictable responses' to actions which threaten autonomy and valued freedoms (Borowski 1997:391). As Borowski argues, 'the more salient the threatened or eliminated freedom, the greater will be the young offender's reactance' (1997:391) and, in turn, the less effective the purposes, be they rehabilitative or retributive, of the institution.

Youth detention centres are not the 'total' institutions described so evocatively by Goffman. However, much government policy proposes that this either is, or could be, or should be, the case. This is a misapprehension. Resources are finite and expertise limited. Incarceration costs the state around $80 000 per juvenile per year. It is a safe guess that a very significant proportion of this figure is devoted to security measures and attempts to hermetically seal what we would argue is an unavoidably and intrinsically porous institution. Factors such as links with the outside world, the 'voluntary' nature of incarceration and inmate attitude have crucial policy implications. Consider one example. Part of the rationale for the progressive curtailment of outside contacts that occurred during our research period was the desire to contain the transmission of drugs. As noted above, the restrictions caused resentment, even amongst those for whom visits were rare, because there appeared to be little sense to the restrictions. Without our being able to claim that they were specifically related, a number of escapes from the centre occurred as well as increased acts of violence within the centre (both spontaneous and planned) during the resentment period. As one young Murri male stated,

> I'm scared to be in here at the moment, I've been in here before and it's always been alright, wouldn't want to stay here, but, I'm only ever in for a month or so - you get fed and meet up with mates - it's not too bad But at the moment, Ralph and Leon and Anthony are tense and that's something I've never seen. They're always so level, keeping the order, but they're doing it alone now, like they're not connected, they don't care anymore. So everyone's watching them to see if they're going to vent, and it's like everyone else is catching it, you know, like something contagious? So everyone is watching everyone to see if it's all going to go off and wondering where they'll be if it does. Me, I just hope I'm anywhere else but here.

The implementation of ever more intrusive management strategies created an atmosphere of tension that a substantial proportion of inmates commented upon. Whilst it could be argued that even small changes in such a controlled and artificial environment may at times have disproportionately substantial effects, when the effect entails the potential for violence one needs to be very sure of the policy objectives and processes (McCorkle et al 1995). We can usefully remind ourselves here of the point made by Platek, that 'the aggression and brutality of the subculture is directly proportional to the aggression and brutality of the prison system' (1990:466). Similarly, Poole & Regoli (1983) note that 'the more coercive the prison conditions, the fewer the opportunities available to alleviate the pains of imprisonment, and thus the greater the pressure and incentive to victimise fellow inmates' (1983:228)[1].

Without wishing to trivialise the importance of the issue of security, it is difficult not to speculate upon the consequences of dispensing with most security measures and relacing them with a 'ribbon' around the institution that everybody understood demarcated the inside from the outside. The diversion of resources from the fruitless pursuit of

inappropriate management strategies into treatment and rehabilitation programs, better qualified staff and ongoing evaluations of outcomes, would, we argue, represent a worthwhile shift in terms of the community response to juvenile delinquency, and is certainly not beyond the capabilities and resources of specific governments (see also Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children 1999). As Kersten has previously noted 'a cynical approach to the reform of juvenile detention centres is not warranted, if their purpose is not entirely punitive and custodial' (1990:490). When detention is oriented towards incapacitation rather than rehabilitation, however, such cynicism is hard to escape.

We argue that there is a need to abandon conceptions of juvenile detention centres as simply being places to incarcerate young offenders in order to protect the wider community. Instead, we, as a society, need new policy frameworks based upon the conception of detainees as semi-voluntary clients of specialised services directed towards repairing the damage done by a society failing in its responsibilities to its youth. It needs to be stressed here that this is not some 'bleeding heart' call to arms. This view does not overlook the fact that there will always be a proportion of young offenders from whom the wider community genuinely needs protection. What we are seeking to do is bring back into focus the recognition that we are talking here about *children*. The corollary of this single obdurate fact is that 'it is vital that we immediately attend to the meanings of these accounts of our children's encounters with the juvenile justice system, for there is subtle but systematic violence being done ... It is a process which in the long run does not benefit victim, offender or society' (O'Connor & Sweetapple 1988:x).

If we are serious about reducing the number of young offenders, reducing the number of victims of crime and reducing the rate at which adolescents are themselves victimised, it is pointless ignoring the fact that when we incarcerate young people we cannot deprive them of personal agency and nor should we seek to do so. What we should be trying to do is encourage them to exercise their agency in ways that do not bring them into self-destructive conflicts with the norms and values of the wider community. Until we accept that there are no neat dichotomies between inside and outside worlds and that there is no hope of sealing young people off from the rest of the world, we will simply play out the same old routines with the same old lack of benefit. Unless we provide detention centres with greatly increased levels of resources to be used in the service of reparation rather than repression, young people will continue to view their spell in detention with well-deserved cynicism.

Acknowledgments

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