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Victims of Homicide
Families Coping with Death by Violence

By Martin Hattersley

Criminology - fact and fiction

Along with a host of minutes of meetings of all shapes and sizes, my recent appointment to the Citizen's Advisory Committee of the Edmonton Institution brings me also a magazine called "Forum on Corrections Research". Printed on rather expensive paper, full of graphs, tables and footnotes, it demonstrates the considerable amount of skill and research that the Correctional Service of Canada puts into its task of seeing that this country's criminals are steered into a more socially acceptable style of life. It also belies the image that the media love to portray, of the Correctional Service and the Parole Board as a bunch of soft hearted idiots, with very little idea of what they are doing.

The most recent issue deals with the subject of "Effective Correctional Programming", and behind the statistics and the jargon, some interesting trends appear.

One statistical analysis is of the connection between certain types of treatment and the rate of reoffending. The figures seem to show clearly that "getting tough on criminals" - such a popular attitude in the media and with certain politicians - is a washout, actually appearing to make things worse. Incarceration, whether continuous or intermittent, fines and the "scared straight" program all lead to measurably higher rates of reoffending than those of a comparison group that was not so treated.

Of other punitive approaches, however, some less drastic treatments aimed at making criminal conduct more difficult, such as drug testing, electronic monitoring, and restitution, did have some positive effect - though nothing very spectacular.

On the other hand, programs on the medical or educational model are not uniformly effective either. In the case of criminals with a record of violence, anger management appears to be a priority. No program of re-education appears to be effective unless this is also addressed, but if it is, then less severe criminality in the future, and a longer time before it reappears, can be expected.

Programs mustn't waffle. They need directly to confront the criminal behaviour that has become part of the offender's lifestyle. An interesting sideline on the above is the degree to which lack of verbal skills (often associated with an upbringing of poverty and/or abuse) is associated with criminal violence. Also, in the case of the aboriginal population, very promising results have come from reintroducing native spirituality and counselling by Elders within the prison system, restoring to the offender a sense of purpose, self-esteem, and a creative and hopeful attitude to future career.

Programs within the institutional prison environment are less successful than when offered to parolees when they are "out on the street". Statistics seem to show that, once violent behaviour has been brought under control, the safest means of preventing a recurrence of criminal behaviour is in fact early parole, with extensive follow up in the community and the threat that parole can be revoked if its conditions are not observed. Day parole, before giving full parole, is a sound indicator of who can be trusted with more freedom, and who can not. Indeed, the Auditor General laments that far too little of Corrections resources are made available to "help offenders make the transition from the institution to the community" - so making it more likely that those released from prison will reoffend from want of adequate community support, particularly in the matter of obtaining employment.

What can be expected from all this? Alas, not perfection. Programs as they are at present, good and bad lumped together, are likely currently reducing the rate of reoffence by about ten per cent. Theoretically,

this figure can likely be increased to thirty or forty per cent by appropriate programming.

I raise all of this, because, while I admire the courage of the Byfield family in producing their local newsmagazine "Alberta Report", my gorge repeatedly rises at the "beat them into shape" boarding school mentality of so many of its editorial writings. It's as if the psychological traumas caused to the aboriginal population in residential schools, let alone to the products of the English public school system, never existed.

Withdrawing children from home, family, culture and often enough, contact with the opposite sex, and using violence to instil "Christian" morality, is hardly the perfect process to produce good citizens: maybe my own graduation from the process gives me this empathy for those who do time in the penal system, which, of course, is not so different. The danger of producing conformity through violence is to create a persona with a mass of insecurities and sexual and other deviations hiding behind a "glittering image" (to use Susan Howatch's term) of utter competence and perfection. Of such are sexual deviates and serial killers made.

More information is available from the Correctional Services of Canada
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