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OUR CHILDREN'S HOUSE

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INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH JUVENILE DETENTION

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.
1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child

Between June 200 and August 2001, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) listened to the stories of eleven young people who had spent time in the Essex County Youth Detention Facility in Newark, New Jersey. This listening project was an outgrowth of the AFSC New Directions Youth Project, a mentorship program with young people who have had a first time brush with the law.

We were unprepared for the young people's reactions as they spoke about their experiences. Many cried. Many expressed so much fear of retaliation that they would not allow us to use their names.

We have testimonies about the use of pepper spray, beatings by guards, inappropriate use of psychotropic drugs, isolation for long periods, and sexual abuse. The children described racism, guard provoked fighting, cold, filth and other forms of brutality. One boy talked about having to salute the director each morning. We heard the stories of enduring experiences, sights, smells and sounds that are inappropriate for anyone, let alone a child. As the young people spoke, the adults appeared lawless. An old poem tells us that

children learn what they live. If they live with hostility, they learn violence. These children speak the language of violence taught by adults. Many of these children were incarcerated when other action could have been taken.

Across the United States children are often held in facilities that are seriously overcrowded and cannot provide educational, mental health and other necessary services. In 1995 Human Rights Watch reported pervasive brutality and lack of a formal complaint system in the juvenile detention system of the state of Louisiana. They talked about children being confined unnecessarily in restraints such as handcuffs and shackles, and being kept in isolation contrary to international standards. In 1999, the World Organization Against Torture found gross violations of the United Nations Convention Against Torture in U.S. juvenile imprisonment policies. Children of color are greatly over represented at all stages of the juvenile justice system.

Current trends in juvenile justice policy and practice in the United States violate a number of United Nations conventions to which the U.S. is a signatory, including the UN Convention Against Torture, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child states that the child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. Whoever they are, wherever they live, these are the rights of every child.

Bonnie Kerness

February 25, 2002

A. H. - age 17, interviewed on June 12, 2000

B. F. - age 17

J. B. - age 20

D. D. - age 15, interviewed January 17, 2001

J. R. - age 18, interviewed on February 22, 2001

A.S.H. - age 16, interviewed on March 7, 2001

"Alexander King" - age 16, interviewed on March 7, 2001

T.H. - age 17, interviewed on May 30, 2001

A.G. - age 16, interviewed July 10, 2001

N.N. - age 17, interviewed July 2001

R.T. - age 15, interviewed August 2001

TESTIMONY

Lockdown [24 hour confinement in a solitary cell, usually employed as a punitive measure.]

A. H. age 17

If you do something wrong, they lock you down. They make you go to bed early and feed you when they want to feed you. They lock you in this little cell (she describes something

about 3 x 5). I cried every night there. It's painful. I felt like I couldn't get air.

When I got locked down and couldn't see my family, that hurt so much. I've been locked down in Irvington, Elizabeth and here. Newark is the worst. (She began crying) When I first got there, they gave me a number. Mine was number 5. They said "your name is number 5". I said I'm a person. They said "no, you are just a number". When they feed you there, you have to eat in two to three minutes or they take it away.

B. F. age 17

Unit one is lockdown. You can't come out at all in lockdown. In the old youth house they had big rats there. In lockdown, they forget to give you lunch and dinner when you are there. That happened to me. They came early in the morning at 2 a.m. to give me a hard sandwich when they remembered.

J. B. age 20

One time a riot broke out. We were all involved. They treated us like dogs. We were hog tied, 23 hour lockdown, shackled. The handcuffs didn't come off.

D. D. age 15

I went in when I was 14 to the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center. They have what they call an "MCU" there, and it's like the "hole" in a regular prison. [MCU stands for "management control unit" involving solitary confinement and sensory deprivation. MCU sometimes results from an administrative, rather than a punitive, decision.] Kids that fight go in there. If you refuse, they come and get you. You don't see anybody in there. The lights go off early and there are no visits there. They bring the food to you. They even turn off the toilets at 9 p.m. so if you have to go, you can't flush. It's freezing at night. There is no heat at all in lockdown.

N.N. age 17

Lockdown is so dirty. Upstairs is clean. On lockdown you only get cold food to eat. You can only take showers once every two or three days. You can't use the phone. I was there for two days. Only good thing is that they let you shower for five minutes. Upstairs it's only two or three minutes.

If you start fighting now, the people, guards, come in and slam the kids on the floor and put cuffs on them. Then they take them down to lockdown for a week.

Abuses of Power

B.F.

They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting one time. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn't breathe. They kept hitting her. We kept telling them that she had asthma, but they wouldn't listen.

The male guards be having sex with the females. Guards were bringing in weed and cigarettes for the kids. I remember one bringing a girl he was having sex with cigarettes. She hid them in her radio. She got caught and they asked her who gave it to her. When she told, he spit on her. She filed charges later on and nothing happened.

Guards call you names. If they don't physically abuse you, they mentally abuse you. They call you punk, pussy, turd, wimp - trying to get you mad. This one guard was calling me names and I didn't even know what they meant.

J. B.

Guards knew they could beat us so they had kids beat other kids up. They would give out cigarettes or weed as a reward. Guards used drugs and used to come in high. If kids went to the superintendent to report, they were told to shut up. Guards had mothers do sexual favors if they wanted to get their kids something special.

D.D.

If the guards don't like you, they will set you up or let you get into a fight. Then they'll call a "code red", which is a riot. I went on a chain gang to go to court and this guard deliberately put the cuffs on me wrong. My hands swelled up really bad. Another guard saw it and took them off and put them on right.

If they do like you, you can get extra snacks at night. In the older units you can do more stuff, but the consequences are worse.

You can be coming down the hallway, and they will purposely push into you trying to provoke or hurt you. I once saw a kid fall all the way down the stairs because he was pushed. I saw the kids bleeding and watched the guard deliberately take his time getting to him. Even if you keep to yourself, they'll still mess with you. There is no way to avoid things.

I knew a kid who went to Jamesburg. [a state youth detention center] He told me that the guards there hit you and beat you with night sticks. They put him in a choke hold until he was unconscious.

The cops are racist. Even the black ones. They stop 9 and 10 year olds in my neighborhood. They throw them in a car and handcuff them. Then they take them to a different neighborhood and drop you off. All for no reason. If they don't like you, they actually put drugs on you. They have a new charge now. It's called "wandering." Can you believe that? Getting charged for "wandering"?!

J. R. age 18

Some kids get treated better than other kids. The guards will give them cigarettes or liquor. I don't know how they did it. Maybe they knew someone.

One time my cellmate didn't want to shower. The guards threw a bucket of water on him

and all over the room. Then they put him in the shower and wanted me to clean up the water. I went off on him. [i.e. lost his temper] They just let us do whatever we wanted.

A.S.H. age 16

At lunch time I saw a guard deliberately eating in a kid's face for no reason. He was hoping the kids would go off. I don't want you to use my name. They could get me.

"Alexander King" age 16

I was in the youth house this year for the first time. Everyone was talking about this boy who was beat up by the officers. He was really bruised up all on his face. I saw him and he was all swollen and bruised.

The cops get smart with you. They keep on saying something so you say something back. I didn't say nothing. When you're walking, they'll just snatch you to make to go somewhere. They pick you up and push you. They were nasty.

Some cops are in your face telling you straight to your face that they don't like you. I heard them tell a little boy that they hoped he would get beat up.

Can you change my name on the paper? I don't want anyone to know my real name.

T.H. age 17

There are two guards in the intake and they put me in a cell and told me to strip naked. [Intake is the process of someone entering an institution. It includes paperwork, medical examination, perhaps a psychological evaluation and decisions on placement.] They told me to get in the shower and they watched me take a shower.

Guards treat certain people with favoritism. If you have a "name" you have some juice. [power] Your "name" comes from what block you live on, if you are Blood or Crips or if you beat someone up bad.

N.N.

There was this Puerto Rican guard who used to be disrespectful to us. She called us names, bitches and stuff. When her supervisor came she was all sweet. She'd wait until we'd walk by the boys and she'd say, "turn your nappy head around!" We all had to write and say what happened so she got mad at us. She put us all on lockdown. She always started the disrespect.

R.T. age 15

The guards come in and they "play" with you. They say something to you, and then you say something back. They get mad and they beat you up.

The guards are like cops. Some of them were so petty. Say you weren't walking in line,

then they'd write you up. Just little stuff and you'd be punished, like not having your jumper pulled up.

Violence

A. H.

They maced boys. If you fight during church, they jump on your back and mace you. They hit you with big sticks. When I got into a fight with another girl, they used pepper spray and hit me with these long, black sticks. I still have the marks on my back. I went crazy. I kept saying "my eyes, my eyes, my eyes."

B. F.

I saw them pepper spray this girl one time. She beat up a boy and they pepper sprayed the girl. She hit the boy real hard because the boy asked the guard if she was gay. They threw the boy in the hole and took all his clothes from him, He had to sleep naked. It was so cold in there. He was screaming.

J.B.

People beat other people up. A lot of stuff kicked off in the cot room where 20 to 30 kids were. If a new person came we would piss in their boots. We played "no one is going to sleep." If a person went to sleep, we put them in the hospital. The guards didn't do anything. If you weren't from Union or Hudson County, the guard would make you victims. You become victims.

D.D.

One time I remember this boy who didn't believe in God. The guard said that he was "refusing," so he grabbed his arm and bent it behind his back. Then he pushed his arm against the kid's throat to choke him. He made him go to church. After that they threw him in the MCU.

J.R.

Even the bigger kids didn't want to go into our unit. The kids are always going off in there. Every day there are fights -between the guards and the kids or the kids and other kids. I was the smallest kid in there and was picked on the most. I held my own. I had to fight the kids and the COs (correctional officers). They put me in isolation for two days for both fights.

One time there were two kids brought in for rape charges. We asked the guard for keys to their room. We went into their room, threw the keys out under the door, and locked ourselves in their room. We beat them up. The guards knew all about it.

If you don't take care of yourself, the guards don't care. I've blocked a lot of memories out. One day they opened up all the cells. All the black kids went up to a Puerto Rican kid and

beat him. The guards never reported it. Up there you see black with black, and Puerto Rican with Puerto Rican. Everybody got their own.

I remember younger kids getting raped by bigger kids.

The only thing that experience left me with is to not shut up for nobody. If someone goes off on me, I'll go off on them. Either you are going to talk or you are going to fight. The people who talk usually get beat up. I was there 29 days. I swear it seemed like two or three months.

T.H.

It has a school, which is okay except for gym where people want to fight. You have to hold your own and fight just so people leave you alone. The guards let you fight. If two niggers want to brawl out, they brawl out. I think that's a good solution because if kids want to fight, they are going to.

They put this one young dude by himself. He'd scream and kick on his cell door and keep everyone up. The kids jumped him when they let him out of the cell because he kept them up.

We were on lockdown every night. A guy started to yell, kick and throw wet tissues out of his cell whenever it was time to go to sleep. A regular CO told him to cut it out and the kid was crying. The CO said he was waking everyone up. When he wouldn't be quiet, the SERT team [Special Emergency Response Team] came in and beat his ass. He went down to the nurse and when he came up he was quiet. They beat him bad. They went in there with clubs. One didn't have a club but he was punching him.

N.N.

People there will say something smart to another person to get them mad. If you don't get a visit, they mess with you. One time my sister came to visit. One of the girls came up on me and said something smart. I started to swing at her. Am I supposed to do nothing? They wanted to put me in lockdown for a week.

Living Conditions, Stories, and Reflections

A. H.

I heard people scream, yell and holler. Sometimes they sing in their cells. Some have kids they are crying for.

My friend Marsha, she was so educated. I hope they don't kill her. I can't go back there to see her because they said I was too young. (She starts crying again). I call up there but they won't let me talk to her. That hurts me so bad. I don't want her to die. That's the only friend that I had when I was in there. We'd sit at church and talk and sing and clap.

The food is mostly sloppy Joe's, rice and beans. One cup of water! One cup of cold tea. One fork, one spoon and one corn break. Breakfast was one cereal. We were always

hungry. Some people sneak food to put in the room at night. You have to hide the food in your pants so you don't get so hungry at night. You be so hungry that you eat when the lights go out so they don't catch you.

B. F.

When I was 12, I was in the old youth house. It was so dirty. They put you in these dirty rooms with bugs all around. With dirty, stinking sheets. The new one is cleaner. In the old one the toilets were filthy with crabs and lice.

J. B.

Being there made me think it was cool. Your mother says jail is not goof but the youth house is play time. You have your friends around. Being there numbs your perception of right and wrong.

It gave me an "I don't care" attitude. Once you've been to the youth house, you think it's cool to sell drugs, steal cars or rob. Out of 15 counselors, maybe two cared. A couple of times I had to see a counselor. One time my brother was in an accident and I was pretty messed up. The counselor didn't care.

A.G. age 16

The kids come out of the youth houses institutionalized. They're out of the youth house and then they go to school and act just like they did when they was in the youth house. The big kids go into school with jail tactics beating on little kids, taking their food and taking their money. The jail kids come out crazy.

T.H.

When you go into the youth house, you can't explain the smell. It's like the smell of iron. All you can see is doors galore with kids locked behind them. Anytime we went to eat, someone was fighting. When we did get the food, it's cold. Some of it is nasty. As soon as you walk into that place you catch chills. You get two showers a week, one pair of drawers and one t-shirt for the week.

R.T.

Everybody keeps banging on the doors, talking all day and night. I just went to sleep as much as I could. I was just waiting to be sentenced. I waited 3 and a half months for my sentence. It was hard.

N.N.

I saw plenty of girls cry there.

The medical was bad. Say if we got a toothache or stomach ache, the nurse will come up next week. They didn't believe us. They thought we just wanted to get out of the big room.

There is no freedom in a place like that. I like to be with my family. They tell you what time to shower, what time to eat. I stay away from people who get into trouble now. I walk away. Only my sister is there for me. I got a plan. I plan on finishing school, getting my own apartment. I'll work. I want to go to school to be a nurse. I can't do math though. I don't do good in math. I know I don't want to get locked up anymore.

Resources

Books

- 1.) "Free the Children" by Craig Kielburger copyright 1998
- 2.) "Juvenile Delinquency Development Treatment Control" Ruth Shonle Cavan copyright 1969

Magazines

- 1.) "Youth Today" www.Youthtoday.org

Reports

United States Department of Justice www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Report

- 1.) "Trying Juveniles in Criminal Courts" copyright 1998
- 2.) "Juvenile Offenders and Victims: Update on Violence" copyright 1997
- 3.) "An evolving Juvenile Court: Volume 11" Copyright 1999
- 4.) "Youth Gang Program and Strategies" Copyright August 2000
- 5.) "Juvenile Transfer to Criminal Court in the 1990's" Copyright 2000
- 6.) "Investing in Girls: A 21st Century" Copyright December 1999
- 7.) "Safe from the start: Taking action on children exposed to violence" copyright November 2000
- 8.) "1998 National Youth Gang Survey copyright November 2000

Public/Private Ventures

- 1.) "'Plain Talk' Addressing Adolescent Sexuality through a community initiative" by Karen E. Walker and Laurie J. Kotloff copyright April 2000
- 2.) Mentoring School?Age Children by Carla Herrera copyright April 2000

3.) Making a Difference: An impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters by Joseph P. Tierney
copyright September 2000

Websites

Delinquents or Criminals ? www.urban.org/crime/delinq.html

Youth Violence ? www.urban.org/crim/module.butts//youth_violence.htm

Institute for the Study of Anti?Social Behavior in Youth ? www.iaj.org/

Youth Crime Watch of America ? www.ycwa.org/

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