

SECTION 2: PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

Increasing Community Involvement in the Treatment of Offenders in Jamaica

*by Dudley Allen**

Introduction

Crime and delinquency are problems of the community. If crime and delinquency are related to a process of successive and accumulating experiences in the community, it follows that action from within the community must be the base of any programme of crime control and prevention. Community involvement in the treatment of offenders is one of the oldest concepts of corrections. Community participation takes place in a variety of organizational contexts and in a number of ways. I will attempt to discuss these in relation to:

- (a) adult correctional institutions,
- (b) juvenile correctional institutions, and
- (c) community services—probation and aftercare.

Community Involvement in Adult Correctional Institutions

In Jamaica, there are eight adult correctional institutions: three maximum security prisons, three medium security prisons, one open facility, and one medium security remand facility. Over the last two years there has been a significant opening up of all the facilities, to permit volunteers to provide a variety of training opportunities including performing arts, prose and poetry composition, arts and craft, academics and music. All volunteers are carefully screened and opportunity is provided for joint seminars with disciplinary staff. All institutions have visiting committees, the members of which meet

regularly, pay visits to institutions at any time and are free to examine all records, buildings and diets, talk to any inmate in private and make recommendations to the Minister of Justice. There is also a Board of Justice consisting of a member of the judiciary and a number of justices. Any two of these or a single judge can enquire into any complaint or hear charges against inmates or staff and communicate any findings or observations direct to the Minister of Justice. Inmates are allowed visitors every three weeks and special visits on application to the superintendent. Letters are allowed in and out after due censorship, approximately once monthly, except in the case of prisoners under death penalty, who can communicate much more often. Representations of the various religious denominations are allowed regular contact with inmates.

Recreational activities permit interested parties in the various sports access to inmates once weekly for purposes of coaching as well as organization of inter-block matches. There are also inter-institutional matches between inmates and staff, and between inmates. In the field of the performing arts, inmates are allowed into the community under supervision to demonstrate their talents. Similarly, professional and amateur groups are allowed into the institutions to perform for inmates.

Recently a steering committee comprising of weighted representation from the private sector was set up by the Minister of Justice. The main purpose of this move was to educate the public and change the prison orientation from mere custody to preparation of inmates for re-integration into the society on release. This committee mounted a massive week-long exhibition of the work of inmates in the various areas of skill training—agriculture, arts and crafts, wood carving,

* Commissioner of Corrections, Department of Correctional Services, Ministry of Justice, Jamaica.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN CORRECTIONS: JAMAICA

sculpture and a wide variety of items. Simultaneously, inmates were allowed to address school assemblies, service clubs, university students and ministers' fraternal, give performances and attend performances. This venture proved a massive success principally in creating a more sympathetic public attitude to inmates in our institutions. Apart from massive orders for the arts and crafts production of inmates, a significant number of volunteers offered their service to provide training opportunities in a wide range of skills, and also counselling.

Community Involvement in Juvenile Correctional Institutions

There are 12 juvenile correctional institutions for the age group of 12 to 17 years old: one maximum security facility, two open institutions for boys and for girls, respectively, one maximum security remand facility for boys, four open remand facilities for boys, and two open remand facilities for girls. All schools, as these institutions are called, have a full educational programme, coupled with skill training in home-making, agriculture, auto mechanics, welding, joinery, building, etc. Wards, as the population of these schools are called, can be released on licence under the supervision of the probation and aftercare officers any time after admission. They spend an average of two years in these institutions.

Individuals, service clubs, and various organizations are intimately involved in the operation of the schools. Generally speaking, the staff are civilians, trained as teachers, counsellors, or instructors in various skills. Each school has a board of management comprising people from the communities in which the schools are located. There is an annual open day when the community is invited to observe and share in the schools' achievements. Wards are allowed to participate in various activities, school sports, festivals, and competitions.

Community Services

Community service is organized on a national basis and staffed by trained social

workers. The principal functions are to provide the courts with social information to facilitate the sentencing process, to supervise and treat adults and juveniles placed under supervision by the courts, to prevent crime and delinquency, and to give general consultation and advice to citizens seeking aid.

The country is divided into 14 areas, each with a supervisor and staff of social workers. In each area there is a committee of local folks who meet regularly to review the work of the officers. These members help in counselling, providing material and emotional support and furnishing employment opportunities. In addition, they act as volunteers providing supervision, that is, as aids to the trained workers.

An evaluation of this programme has indicated an 80 per cent success rate. The evaluation was based on contacting some 75 per cent of clients discharged from probation supervision five years ago to determine if they had had any further conflict with the law or they were gainfully employed or settled in school.

Aftercare service is provided to both adults and juveniles in institutions. Aftercare officers, i.e., trained social workers, are based in the institutions, and interview each entrant on admission. If the inmate or ward indicates need for assistance to family left in the community, those officers in the community are contacted to deal with the situation. The idea behind aftercare is to begin to plan for the inmate's or ward's release from the day of admission to the institution. After release from institutions, aftercare officers in the community supervise and assist ex-inmates.

Funds are provided to undertake programmes and projects in respect of individual ex-inmates. Such projects may entail provision of accommodation, establishment of small business, seeking employment opportunities, all geared towards the reintegration of the offender into the society.

Proposed Measures for Sentencing and Treatment of Offenders

Research has shown that institutionalization is not a very fruitful way of treating offenders, as the rates of recidivism

PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

run an average of 65 per cent nationally, and 80 per cent for urban institutions. But the shift of focus from mere custody to rehabilitation is yet too young to provide any indication of its feasibility or success.

The first step towards increasing community involvement in treatment is to send less people to prison. In keeping with this objective, the Government is introducing a new sentencing package which provides a wide range of options to the courts. These include:

(1) Suspended sentence—Where a court finds a man guilty, the sentence is passed but there is a stay of execution for a specified period. If this specified period passes without incident, then the offender is completely free. Conversely, if he runs foul of the law during the period of suspension, he will have to serve the sentence for the original offence as well as the new offence.

(2) Community service order—Persons found guilty in courts will be ordered to perform specific tasks organized by the probation officer for a specific number of hours. For example, a drunken driver who crashes into a wall will be ordered to rebuild the wall.

(3) Day training centre order—Offenders will be ordered to attend training centres for a specific number of hours weekly, thereby affording them a chance to acquire a skill. This will help to reduce the number of unskilled youngsters in the country.

(4) Fines—These will be paid on the instalment system.

In relation to juveniles, proposals are to refrain from keeping these offenders in custody to await trial, even in cases where

there are no relatives to bail them. Individuals in the community are to be requested to keep these in their homes and afford them emotional support up to the time of their court appearance and sentencing.

In all this there will be increased opportunity for involvement by the community. The key factor in all this kind of identification is the development of greater self-worth both to the offender and the individuals giving service.

During this year, Parole Act will also be proclaimed, thereby providing opportunities for offenders sentenced to imprisonment to have the hope of spending a portion of their sentence in the community. Such a move will allow for greater community participation in the treatment of offenders. Involvement may be through acting as friends of parolees or as voluntary supervisors, providing employment and sharing their homes.

In addition, provision for temporary absence is being drafted into legislation and regulations to permit inmates to go out to work during the day and return to institutions at night or on weekend. This will also allow inmates to be temporarily released to visit their families. This innovation will:

(a) Reduce the incidence of homosexuality, which now operates like prostitution in some institutions;

(b) Help to save some of the family dislocation and disruption that imprisonment engenders;

(c) Allow communities to get used to seeing inmates, thus reducing prejudices and fear and thereby making for a less traumatic reintegration process; and

(d) Help to reduce current expenditure on institutional treatment.