

Reflections on international youth justice: a personal view

Rod Morgan is shocked by the imagery at a recent youth justice conference.

When it comes to youth justice, my emotions often run high, particularly when the impact on individuals is clear. I sometimes come home shaken from interviewing children in custody. Tears tend to well up when I'm watching a wonderful performance, dance or music for example, by kids who've been in trouble and whose faces also betray some of the wear and tear they've borne in their short lives. So, when attending the fourth International Juvenile Justice Observatory conference in Rome at the beginning of November 2010, I made sure that I went to two photographic film shows run during the lunch breaks.

The second show, a montage of short film clips, interview material and photographic portraits of youths in custody or attending drug centres in Chile, made a discernible impact on the audience. As the chairman for the subsequent session, the director of the Miami-Dade County, Florida Juvenile Service Department, observed, most of us had been stunned by what we had watched. The photographer, Olivio Argenti, told us that the majority of the young subjects of his black and white portraits with which his show ended were already dead, from murder, suicide or AIDs. Their intrinsically beautiful faces were ravaged by knife scars, drug addiction or AIDS-hastened missing teeth. Many had hard, wary eyes out of which no trust shone.

But I was more affected by the show the previous day to which no

conference chairman subsequently made reference. Lizzie Sadin, a French photographer, showed black and white stills taken in youth prisons in several countries. Her sequence concluded with about a dozen shots of black youths imprisoned in a Texas boot camp. These images shocked me much more than the overcrowded, African dormitories we'd seen earlier. Indeed they built within me an anger that I could not shake off when I went to the final conference session about 'evidence-based youth justice practice in the US'.

Black youth cringe

We saw black youths on their knees in prison yards dressed in fatigues, bent forward, heads down, with wrist, waist and ankle chains. We saw rows of black kids doing push ups, the pain and strain of their effort contorting their facial muscles while overweight, brutish, sheriffs bent over them, bellowing orders, their night sticks drawn. We saw a black youth cringing while two sheriffs, Stetson hatted, lips parted, their noses only two or three inches from his face, screamed abuse or instructions at him. It was horrific. Truly shocking. As bad as any of the images from Guantánamo Bay. The worst form of child abuse. More appalling than the poverty stricken African dormitories because this was deliberate, concerted, bureaucratically organised, chillingly engineered in the wealthiest, most powerful country on earth. This was embedding hate in Good Ole Texas. None of the American presenters

said a thing. Except, explicitly or by implication. Boot camps don't work: it's 'not evidence based practice'. And it's expensive: incarcerating kids is. And we have a fiscal crisis.

The American presenters were good guys. They described and explained a commendable direction of policy travel in the jurisdictions for which they were responsible: juvenile arrests, down; juvenile detention population, down; reconviction rates, down; delivery of evidence-based intervention programmes, up; aggregate youth justice service costs, down. And, collectively, we Europeans applauded. This was North America showing the way.

But underneath I seethed. For 30, 40, 50 years the USA has been operating a penal policy as if on Mars. And now that the Americans show signs of coming down to earth we applaud as if all the lessons we have to learn come again from across the Pond. But at the conference in Rome most of the countries listening to the US team have incarceration rates a fifth or a tenth of that in the USA. These European countries never did criminalise and incarcerate on the North American scale. They maintained a sense of positive mutuality. No wonder some of the data emerging from the American evidence-based programmes are looking good. The policies are being applied in a context that was always crazy, and substantially remains so. Let's put North American policy in proper context. And in the UK let's start taking lessons not from across the Pond, but from across the Channel. In Maryland where Donald DeVore, the longstanding secretary for the Department of Juvenile Services, reported such terrific progress, they still have 1,900 juveniles in custody in a state with a total population of a mere 5.3 million. Do some calculations and reflect on that.

I'm feeling better now that I've written this. ■

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