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Last Chance in Texas: The Redemption of Criminal Youth by John Hubner

Reviewed by David L Chadwick, MD

Last Chance in Texas is about a way some teenagers who have committed serious crimes can be rehabilitated and re-enter society with a very low risk of recidivism. It holds interest for health providers for several reasons.

John Hubner's factual account underscores the fact that virtually all delinquent youths were abused children. It can be assumed that all of them had contact with health providers in their early months and years. It is likely that had their problems been recognized, opportunities for preventive interventions were present. Our ongoing failure to recognize risk and to provide the proven family supports that reduce abuse and later delinquency could be considered as a failure of the primary health care system because no other system has both access to almost all families with young children and the ability to engage them. Home visiting programs have been shown to reduce child abuse and later delinquency.

Further, this population of young people is at high risk to prematurely re-enter the health system. Even if they may have learned to avoid future criminal acts, the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences on health will probably catch up with them in the forms of untreatable obesity, smoking, drug and alcohol use, heart disease, and certain cancers.

Reading Mr Hubner's book causes both pain and joy as he mixes history and facts from the juvenile justice system with the personal stories of the young people caught in that system. He shows how remarkable (and how hard) it is for them to take responsibility and to learn empathy. An especially moving chapter describes how parents of murdered children with extraordinary courage join with the professional

staff to confront youthful murderers or attempted murderers with the ongoing pain they have caused.

The methods employed by the staff at the Giddings State School and supported by the Texas Youth Commission are also of great interest to mental health professionals and are worthy of study by the many correctional programs for youth in other states. The "Last Chance" in the title is apt; the youths who fail to meet the tough criteria for parole from Giddings will be sent to adult prisons to serve out long sentences.

The specter of prison did not deter these youths and prison is not enough to turn them around in four or five years. The Texas program, complex and multifaceted, appears to offer some success. Some of the main components appear to be firmly rooted in well-accepted principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy; other techniques are considered unproven by mainstream psychologists. It has been difficult to isolate its many components in a way that would allow rigorous therapeutic research. It's also pretty clear that putting on a program like this in any state is a tough political task, and that superimposing an expensive research program that might show why it works is unlikely.

The Texas program appears less expensive than the ineffective programs provided in California and many other states. These more typical programs return many youths to the street "angrier and dumber" than when they were confined. The Texas program is very inexpensive in comparison with prolonged confinement.

Mr Hubner's book is not a comfortable read, but it is clearly and simply written with a clear message. It's a good book for all professionals and especially health professionals. ♦

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