

## **Social Justice Perspective**

By teenage years, youths who have not been properly educated and imbued with self-soothing social skills, confidence and curiosity, are headed for trouble.

The path of children into prison begins in the home, the school and the community. Therein lies the keys to diverting this path or paving a way out.

By Susan M. Lankford
Photos by Susan M. Lankford



Author photo by Polly Lankford Smith

Most of the 2.3 million

Americans in prison today have children in the juvenile justice system (500,000) or in foster care (550,000). The majority of these kids need not be there. There are four essential things we can do reduce or eliminate the at-risk behavior that sends them into juvenile halls or paid parenting.

Very often these children have been abused, traumatized and/ or abandoned, and their education has been denied or neglected. Frequently, the parents of these children mistreat them through ignorance, immaturity-induced rage, their inability to love and/ or the lack of secure boundaries.

Angry, unhappy youths erupt with incomprehensible levels of acting out and self-destruction, often belonging to gangs and experiencing early teen

pregnancy, which only exacerbate the problems.

Youth incarceration is supposed to be geared toward rehabilitation, not punishment. But because America instinctively chooses to lock these troubled youths up and forget them, and because most jurisdictions lack statutorily mandated recovery and remediation programs, there is a shocking 75% recidivism rate over two years among these youngsters.

Non-violent youths would be much better off learning a trade and developing positive work ethics, performing community service, helping others, caring for animals in Humane Society settings and belatedly developing reading and math skills that earn them diplomas or GEDs.

I recently published a book, BORN, NOT RAISED: VOICES FROM JUVENILE HALL, based on

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to me.
I feel education is
If I could share something important with you I would tell you have for your kids cause
it such when no one cares.

Incarcerated youth answer surveys on their personal fears, hopes and dreams.

Above: Yale, age 15. Below: Oberlin, age 16.

interviews with pediatric psychiatrists, neurobiologists, judges, probation officers and other professionals—as well as discussions my daughter and I conducted with more than 120 incarcerated teenagers—eight of Most parents do not receive them weekly. This research yielded highly useful advice into ways to end or prevent youth incarceration and keep more kids out of foster homes.

A first key is proper early childhood development. In my book I present a timeline by Dr. Diane Campbell, a leading specialist in child development, in which she marks the critical

stages for successful development or for the derailments that push forward to the next critical marker. For instance, the two-year old tantrums that are not resolved by age five are disruptive in the kindergarten classroom,

causing havoc for the teacher and the other children who are vulnerable. If the parent is defensive, this disruptive child will not receive help or resolution for his or her issues. with positive affirmation essential messages from teachers that pertain to their child's emotional well-being with positive affirmation.

At age five, a level of guilt awareness needs to have been achieved. Age seven to nine tends to be an inappropriate and unsociable stage, where kids do a lot of acting out, sometimes

I am a young person scared about the future. I am scared that I won't finish high school I am a young adult. I can graduate from high school and I am worried about: a) MY SELF b) killing myself on the nuts
c) getting addicted too lings again

I want happiness in my life

I hope that I will have it someday I feel like a root on a eagl with nowhere too go out down I <u>Sleep</u> when I am upset.

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There is a critical need for a family with a good-enough, consistent, loving and nurturing figure who helps children through the developmental stages so as to produce an empathic, responsible youth, capable of resilience, adjustment and impulse control.

with violence. By teenage years, youths who have not been properly educated and imbued with self-soothing social skills, confidence and curiosity, are headed for trouble.

Secondly, one of the main things I learned, which I stress in my book, is that there is a critical need for a family with a goodenough, consistent, loving and nurturing figure who helps children through the develop-

mental stages so as to produce an empathic, responsible youth, capable of resilience, adjustment and impulse control.

I also indict today's educational system for its failure to respond to the critical needs of students. I detail terrific programs which have discovered how to motivate kids who can't meet classroom demands.

A third major point of my book is that we need to start teaching parenting early. Fourteen-year-olds in juvenile detention often have kids but lack any ideas on how to parent properly. Drug abuse and gang membership are growing exponentially today, so we need to teach the reasons and means to avoid these traps.

Fourth, every community should insist on and offer programs that rehabilitate incarcerated children, teaching them useful skills and helping them develop positive, life-affirming attitudes. In my community of San Diego, many fine programs of this type have been offered, until the recent economic crisis forced the reduction or curtailment of many of them. In California, we spend \$14 billion on locking folks up, without mandating improvement before release. We are also having early releases from state facilities, to save state expenditures.

In the media we constantly hear that our country is the greatest in the world. Yet we rank low in quality of education. And we are number one in the world for the most incarcerated.

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