

Juvenile Defender

Riverside Police Chief leading effort to keep the juvenile justice system from being child's play.

■ BY JOSHUA SIGMUND

In a Virginia conference room filled with law enforcement leaders from around the country, the first significant steps were taken to address an issue that continues to plague the justice system: What do we do with juvenile offenders?

At this Sept. 26 meeting in Crystal City, Va. – The International Association of Chiefs of Police and MacArthur Foundation Law Enforcement Leadership in Juvenile Justice National Summit – Riverside Police Chief Thomas Weitzel presented the “Law Enforcement Leadership Role in the Advancement of Promising Practices in Juvenile Justice Survey,” which was conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and the MacArthur Foundation, a Chicago-based private organization that supports research and change in a number of human rights, community development and international peace issues. The survey, a culmination of two years of research, asked police chiefs from across the country to assess the state of the juvenile justice system.

An overwhelming 77 percent of chiefs answered they believe that their local juvenile justice system is broken. A meager 26 percent said they believe the current system improves public safety. And although 79 percent of respondents agreed they should be heavily involved, only one in five said they exercise a significant role in their community's juvenile justice system.

Such responses exposed an overwhelming conclusion about the current state of the juvenile justice system:

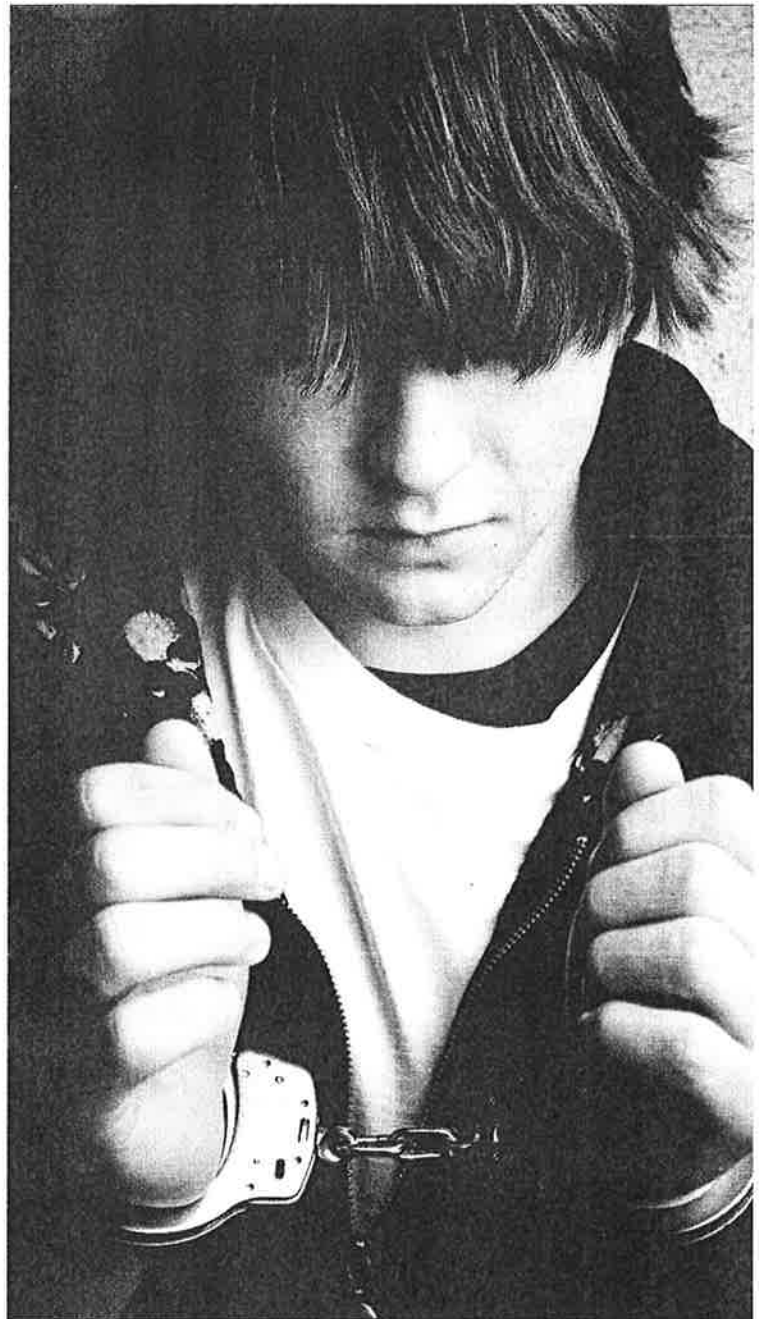
“Obviously,” Weitzel stated, “it's not working.”

Problem child

Each year, thousands of non-violent juveniles across the country get arrested for petty high school fights, minor retail thefts, minor drug possessions and even for running away. They are tried in adult courts, and often incarcerated among hardened adult criminals.

“Are you going to sentence a juvenile for one marijuana joint when some states are decriminalizing it completely?” asked Weitzel as an example of a systematic flaw. “I don't even like zero tolerance; it's proven to not work.”

And even if and when these juveniles are released, their trouble is far from over. With criminal records, the federal government won't grant them student loans which could severely hamper their chances of going to college, often putting their futures in jeopardy. Then one day when



they are 25 years old and looking for a job, a background check could automatically dismiss them.

Further, from a financial perspective, the survey found evidence that contrary to public belief, it is less expensive

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RIVERSIDE POLICE CHIEF THOMAS WEITZEL

to treat juveniles than to house them in facilities.

“It's absolutely less expensive,” Weitzel emphasized. “Some of these policy makers who say that warehousing juveniles is financially sound simply don't have the data to back up their claims. It's not true.”

So why aren't decision makers taking these juveniles and mentoring them using other proven alternatives? “The reason we found out,” explained Weitzel, “is because the public doesn't want its dollars spent on preventative programs and rehabilitation, and politicians don't want to run with that campaign slogan, so to speak. It's not a good headline.”

Partners in crime...reform

The issue's importance is corroborated by the unique partnership between the IACP and the MacArthur Foundation, two organizations that seldom are mentioned in the same sentence.

“From an outside view,” noted Weitzel, “people in general look at the Foundation as a liberal agency, and they look at the law enforcement community as being very conservative. I disagree, but regardless, this partnership – the first time the Foundation partnered with a law enforcement agency in its history – is a big deal.”

It all began when IACP Director of Research, John Firman, an Illinois native, reached out to Weitzel to ask for help making a presentation to the Foundation, which had been working on juvenile justice reform since 1996 through supporting research, training, policy analysis, public education and practical interventions across 14 states. In 2003, the Foundation launched “Models for

Models for Change Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice,” a \$100 million effort to develop successful models

of system-wide reform that other states could learn from and emulate, and to create a wave of juvenile justice reform built on new scientific evidence and knowledge of best practices.

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“(Firman) asked me to help him to get chiefs involved in juvenile justice reform nationwide,” Weitzel recalled. “John then flew to Chicago and we met with the Foundation’s executive staff that reviews grant applications. We met for two hours and laid out a plan to form a partnership.”

Eventually, the duo found out that they would be awarded a multi-stage grant of \$820,000 over 24 months to conduct a survey, create the policy summit development of juvenile justice leadership institute curriculum and hold one pilot institute.

“There was definitely a passion there,” Weitzel discovered.

Phase one of the grant provided \$250,000 to plan small workshops. Weitzel selected chiefs from across the U.S. to come to Chicago for a meeting to set up going about getting police executives, sheriffs, college law enforcement and others involved in the process.

Along with IACP Senior Program Manager Aviva Kurash and Program Manager Kate Rhudy – the people who Weitzel described as “down in the trenches doing the day-to-day work for the partnership with the Foundation” – Weitzel is looking to find law enforcement leaders, sheriffs and commanders who “when they speak,” he noted, “carry a lot of weight. We need them to say that we need systematic changes in Illinois and nationwide.”

Weitzel referenced a model juvenile justice system in Miami Dade County, Fla. “In my opinion,” he said, “it’s the best model in the country to follow, and we’re trying to bring in those experts and say how we can bring this proven track record to other states.

“One of the first things we wanted to do was to perform

a national survey of the nation’s chiefs to prove that there was a problem in the processes that regulate juvenile justice,” he added.

Two years later, Weitzel was standing in front of a who’s who of law enforcement leaders in Virginia, presenting the nearly-50-page document, and stressing that “We have to be outspoken, and in some cases we have to be aggressive and stop the flow of locking everybody up.”

Hope and change

The next step for the partnership is to arrange executive training seminars, to be launched in 2014. In a hotel conference setting, 40-50 chiefs in each location will be presented data and proven programs with stories of how it worked.

“After that, we’ll really see where the change is going to go in 2015-2016,” Weitzel said.

“Is it going to happen tomorrow?” he continued. “No. But we’re two years in the process and we’re already seeing movement and change. The next step is the meetings and to start spreading the word of the report. Realize that this is a major program, and you can get involved by reading the document, taking the survey, speaking to your local court systems, calling your local media and talking about the initiative. People need to go to the federal government and congress, and say that we need change. We want people to stand up and speak the truth and express that you won’t get penalized politically. Sometimes, it’s hard for policy makers to make changes because it doesn’t sound right politically, but that’s not my concern. I’m not interested in headlines – I’m interested in long term changes.” ♥



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