

# High fences

**I went to Project Turnaround--Ontario's "boot camp" for young offenders--half expecting to find monsters and prison guards. Instead, I found children and caregivers. But the hard truth is that, for most of the kids I met, a life of crime is just beginning**

By [Ivor Shapiro](#)

published in [Toronto Life](#), January 1999

From outside the fence, it looks quite ordinary. A small country school, perhaps, with its spidery single-storey white vinyl-sided building, flags flying over a pleasant front garden. Quite ordinary, except for the fence: three times my height, angling inward with thinner mesh on top, impossible to climb. Inside, too, everyone I met since 6:30 this morning could have been ordinary high school kids and staff, except for their paramilitary uniforms. The teenagers did mostly regular teenage stuff all day: breakfast, school, lunch, homework, playing catch in the front yard. An ordinary day, except for the parade-ground drill, the substance-abuse group, the anger-management training--and the fence.

And one other thing: the fact that I am now watching the camp from outside the fence on Moonstone Road, north of Barrie. The plan for my late afternoon and evening at Project Turnaround, Ontario's experimental privately run "strict-discipline" prison for young offenders, had been to follow a squad of kids through math class, supper and a baseball game. But a few minutes ago, at four p.m., I was informed that this was turning out to be "a very bad day," and politely asked to leave. Which is why I am in my car outside, looking in, feeling puzzled.

It's a feeling I've grown familiar with over the past few weeks, meeting the people who populate the young offenders' system in Ontario: a persistent feeling that I'm missing something. Both here at Turnaround and at the more traditional Sprucedale Youth Centre at Simcoe, near Lake Erie, kids and adults radiated positiveness. The inmates spoke determinedly of leaving crime behind, of how the prison program was helping them catch up on education, battle addiction, plan a fresh start. The staff spoke of helping kids to develop noncriminal habits, of providing tools to manage emotions and avoid conflict. I came to these places half expecting to find monsters and prison guards. Instead, I found children and care-givers.

And yet, in both places, I never shook the sense of being a visitor in a far-away country with its own language, wisdom and culture, its mysteries with which I could not be trusted. That what is, is more than what seems.

###

***Q: What was the worst thing you ever did?***

***A: What do you mean?***

***Q: What crime was the worst?***

***A: Oh, there are so many. I really don't know. I've been in that space a long time; I started when I was 14 years old. They're all bad.***

The remembered conversation (which pops into my head while I sit on Moonstone Road, musing about the world of young criminals and the task of turning them around) was with a big-smiled warm-voiced 18-year-old we'll call T. (The Young Offenders Act forbids publication of his name.) I met T., a break-and-enter veteran and recent "graduate" of Project Turnaround, in Toronto some days ago. His sentence was eight months' secure custody; three weeks before his release date, a judge had downgraded the remaining time to open custody, a kind of half-way house.

***Q: Any violent crimes?***

***A: Not that I was convicted of.***

T's criminal career began when, in his words, he "got caught up with the wrong friends." One day they went to steal a car, and T went along. That got him an open-custody sentence, which was where he learned how to steal a car on his own. Next time inside (he told me, drumming his fingers and narrating in jocosely twelve-step testimony style), he learned how to break into houses. He was unhappy with the way his young life was going (he told me), but didn't know how to break the pattern and couldn't talk to his parents. A school teacher or counsellor? He never spent long enough in high school to get to know one.

This, at least, changed with his arrival at Turnaround: attendance at the camp's school is compulsory. T had hunkered down and, in six months, had passed Grade 10. He himself found this hard to believe. "The way I was before, I'd never obey anything. If you told me to sit, I'd run. But I was one of the best cadets in Project Turnaround!"

And outside the fence, will he be a model citizen, too? The causes and remedies for juvenile crime are dauntingly complex, but three facts are brilliantly clear. One: almost all boys commit crimes. Two: most soon stop. Three: a few never do.

On Fact One, Canada's leading quantifier is criminologist Marc Le Blanc of the University of Montreal, who looked at interviews with delinquents and nondelinquents during a massive longitudinal study. Le Blanc says that ninety per cent of males report having committed a crime during adolescence. (So do seventy-seven per cent of females, but girls almost invariably stop at vandalism and minor thefts, while one boy in five commits more serious crimes, such as break-and-enter, auto theft or assault with a weapon.) Less than one kid in twenty gets caught.

Fact Two--that for most kids, the thrill of crime quickly fades--is the silver lining. Most criminal careers are over by the end of the teens, and in four cases out of five, Ontario judges are content to let the young perpetrator off with a warning, probation or:at most:an open-custody sentence.

But then there's Fact Three. About one young offender in twenty descends into a spiral of persistent law-breaking. These six per cent--who commit fifty per cent of youth crime--populate a depressing chart in a textbook coauthored by Le Blanc. According to the chart, petty larcenies tend to begin by age eleven. The next few years bring shoplifting, vandalism and theft. By age fourteen, burglaries and car thefts show up. From sixteen to eighteen is the age of assaults, drug trafficking and sexual offences. Then, at twenty to twenty-two, come fraud and homicide.

It's persistent offenders--kids like T--who chiefly inhabit secure-custody facilities. How likely is it that

such a kid will become an adult criminal? "Very likely," says Le Blanc. "If we can reduce the recidivism rate from ninety per cent to eighty or eighty-five per cent, then that's a good gain."

This is the hardest truth of youth crime, the bleak picture of T's likely future. Combine it with the popular misconception that youth crime is on the rise and you have the reason Solicitor General Bob Runciman decided to try something new in juvenile corrections. Project Turnaround was conceived in a Runciman-authored campaign promise before the 1995 election. It quickly attracted the "boot camp" name that's stuck in the media as well as in government circles--and among young offenders themselves--but the ministerially correct name is "strict-discipline facility."

Neither shoe fits. True, life at Turnaround is structured loosely on a military model: staff and inmates use ranks (from colonel down to cadet); "reveille" is at six a.m.; the kids learn to march parade-ground style. But project staff disavow the demeaning, high-volume intimidation found in classic correctional boot camps. Those "shock incarceration" programs, adopted by several American states to teach first offenders an unforgettable lesson, have been largely discredited as a means to reform juveniles. If the Tories in opposition liked the idea, they applied sober second thought when they attained power.

And Turnaround is no stricter than Sprucedale, its more conventional and widely respected equivalent. True, staff at Sprucedale are almost as laid-back in deportment and dress as their teenaged charges. But the security at Sprucedale is tighter and the mealtimes markedly quieter, probably because the older centre has a tougher crowd of inmates to control, including murderers, arsonists, rapists and kids with serious psychiatric disorders. None of the above was deemed suitable for the Turnaround experiment.

There are other striking differences. The ninety-bed Sprucedale has vastly more spacious grounds, better equipment, more experienced staff and fewer students per schoolteacher. On the other hand, Turnaround's thirty-two inmates follow a mandatory program of tasks that inmates complete to earn "graduation," the prospect of an early sentence review, and two additional high-school credits. The tasks include displaying proper table manners, describing and resolving an ethical dilemma, running a seven-minute mile, using the want ads, writing a daily diary, and on and on, enough to keep a kid busy for every spare hour of the four to six months that most spend here. And there's no TV at Turnaround.

But in fundamentals, the two places are more similar than different. Neither place tolerates fighting, racism, threats or smoking. Each program rests on the relationship between a kid and a primary worker, backed up by a clinical case manager. Each aims at focusing kids' minds on what they do, not why they do it. Each emphasizes sports and fitness, and rewards good behaviour with privileges--access to radio, extra phone calls, even a private tv lounge for the best-behaved elite at Sprucedale. ("You can't train a dog without a bone," says Sprucedale unit manager Steve Slaven.) Each punishes infractions by withdrawing privileges or, in serious instances, imposing temporary isolation. Neither permits physical punishment or verbal abuse of inmates.

And at both, staff, who exude a disorienting mix of no-nonsense and touchy-feely, seem to believe almost pathologically in the potential of the kids in their care. Again and again, I heard tirelessly cheerful custodians say: "They're good kids."

###

***Theory, according to the Cadet Handbook of Project Turnaround: "When you are in a section room and an officer enters, you must:***

***1) stop what you are doing;***

**2) come to the position of attention;**

**3) stay at that position until told to carry on."**

Practice--no one stood up when Colonel Sally Walker, project director and commanding officer, walked me through the junior dorm today. A few kids were lying on their bunks, reading, writing or staring into space; one or two looked up and smiled as Walker said hello before opening the courtyard door and stepping out into the sunshine.

A boot camp, I decide as I wait out on Moonstone Road, this definitely isn't. (As I wait for what? Perhaps a police car's arrival. If there's serious trouble in there, they're supposed to call in the OPP.)

And a colonel, Sally Walker isn't, either. Slim, middle-aged, with short blond hair and set jaw, she was sporting a black pantsuit, though she could look quite comfortable in epaulettes and braid. When asked about her self-awarded "rank," she confessed: "I feel kinda funny about it." Born in England and raised in New Liskeard, Ontario, Walker is a criminologist by training and former executive director of Ottawa-Carleton's John Howard Society. She was program director of a maximum-security treatment centre for criminal adolescents in Florida when she heard, in late 1996, that Ontario was about to invite private-enterprise proposals for a strict-discipline facility. She called up longtime colleague Brad DeLong, a social worker then running a substance-abuse program in Ottawa. They agreed to start working on a business plan for building what Walker calls, with no apparent irony, "a better mousetrap."

By February 1997, the two had registered a partnership called "Encourage Youth" and Walker had quit her Florida job to work full-time on a pitch for the three-year contract. The government would supply and secure the physical plant--a modified prison farm--but the financial risks of this venture (unprecedented in Canada) involved much guesswork about costs, from liability insurance to inmates' cough medicines. Bidding against five other companies, Encourage Youth won the contract, valued at \$2.34 million a year (\$200 per inmate per day at full capacity, compared with \$250 at the ministry's own youth centres), plus \$400,000 for a follow-up program. Walker appointed DeLong deputy director and lieutenant-colonel, and opened her better mousetrap for business in the summer.

Almost immediately, two of the mice staged an embarrassing escape. The two were caught in a nearby field, and by the end of August, they and eight other kids had been transferred to government-run jails. The camp ran below capacity during security upgrades; by spring, it boasted nineteen graduates. The staff of forty includes three clinical treatment specialists; most of the rest are youth workers whose résumés emphasize outdoor recreation, substance-abuse work or military drill. Each youth worker looks after a squad of eight kids for a twelve-hour shift, and is assigned as primary worker or counsellor for one or two youths.

It will be another year or two before anything meaningful can be said about the experiment's effects on recidivism--or, therefore, its cost-effectiveness. But just as the press sprang on the early escape to pour scorn on Turnaround, the government lost no time claiming success--even producing a Throne Speech last April that quoted an inmate's effusive mother by name. This apparent breach of the Young Offenders Act obliged Runciman to step aside during a three-month RCMP probe. By that time, he had already instructed all youth centres to adopt some principles of "strict discipline"--restricted TV, bed inspections and locked-up ping-pong tables, but no military ranks or marching.

###

***The Colonel: This is Mr. S, and this is Mr. N.***

What I remember best about the two young offenders introduced to me over a macaroni-and-cheese lunch today is that they shook hands firmly, looking me in the eye. (As a yellow bus ambles down Moonstone Road past the camp, I wonder how many of the high-schoolers on board habitually greet strange adults with confidence.) N was a chunky taciturn boy with a scar under his right eye. S, athletic and more engaging, told me about the six days after his last release from jail, when he committed the two break-and-enters that got him the 14 months he's serving now.

*Colonel: That's a chunk of time.*

*S: There's only one Y.O. judge in my home town, and the last time I was there he told me he never wanted to see me in his court again.*

*N [sagely]: Small town, you know.*

*Colonel [interpreting for me]: There's a general perception that rural judges are tougher than Toronto judges.*

*Me: So, do your next B&E in Toronto.*

*S and N: [Laughter.]*

*Colonel [chuckling]: Now, that's not the kind of counselling we do here. [More laughter, like buddies.]*

And what, I asked, did Mr N think he needed in order to leave crime behind him? "A new neighbourhood," he said at once. "That's what my mom says, anyway. She's thinking of moving when I get out. But some people say, it's not where you live, it's the friends you get."

"The friends you choose," corrected the colonel.

"Choose. Right."

Teaching kids to make choices is at the centre of young offenders' programs. "You need to somehow help them understand cause and effect," says Walker, "instead of just being reactive to the latest event. To be able to anticipate the boiling-over point, to be able to understand the cues [in a conversation that may end in conflict], to anticipate the problems." It's hard to do that when you come from a home like the ones that tend to produce seriously criminal kids. These are the children of physical and/or sexual abuse, of parents with criminal records and/or addictions, of repeated separations and divorce.

And then there's the system itself--the daily contact with criminal peers, and the dehumanizing effect of being in jail. Jail meaning the youth centres and, worse, the detention centres, warehouses for those awaiting trial or sentence. I toured the province's newest kids' DC, the Toronto Youth Assessment Centre at Mimico, which makes Sprucedale and Turnaround look like spas. TYAC offers one hour's exercise a day in a small courtyard, serves meals in cells, and offers an optional rudimentary school with an extremely high turnover. One obviously disgruntled guard telephoned to tell me TYAC is overcrowded, understaffed, unsafe and chronically violent: "It's a biblical setting. There's fires, floods and fights every night." The blander management version is not substantially different.

Not surprisingly, Walker says, "The offenders tend to be less optimistic about the world than other kids, and they tend to have less trust--partly because they've gravitated to untrustworthy peers. They have the

sense that everyone out there uses, everyone lies."

That's why staff in places like Turnaround and Sprucedale think it vital that each boy be given the chance to bond with an adult whom he can trust and who cares about him. Within that relationship, the kid may slowly learn how to think as noncriminal people do. But individual "plans of care" also define key treatment areas including--for a disproportionate number of kids--help with anger management or substance abuse, or both. The help is delivered through treatment groups as well as one-to-one clinical counselling.

"Change is gradual," says Scott Belisle, one of Turnaround's three young case managers. "But if they make some movement from, 'I don't have a problem with anger management,' to, 'Well, maybe I have a problem,' to, 'Yeah, I have a problem and I'm gonna start looking into what I can do about it,' well, that's three steps. That's a lot of change. Someone can be in, 'I don't have a problem,' for the rest of their life."

Change goes beyond talking. To move from Level One (freshman) to Level Four (senior), the kids at both Turnaround and Sprucedale must achieve consistent and escalating scores for behaviour, attitude and responsibility. But Walker says that sometimes, the most important thing is "just giving the kid a taste of normality. And is that such a bad thing? You're not going to undo all of fifteen years' damage. You're just giving him a chance to be a child for a few months."

To be a child. To attend school. To go camping. To harvest maple syrup and play ball. And to march, like a soldier?

Walker leans forward, blue eyes bright. "Actually!"--she jabs a forefinger toward the sky--"I didn't get that either. If you'd asked me about boot camps a few years ago, I would have said, 'Well, what does it teach?'" This changed when she was working at the Rebound Cypress Creek centre in Florida. In a transition period, a military regime including parade drill was introduced. That was the only change for a while, and it was then that she noted a striking improvement in attitude and behaviour. "The kids seem to take pride in it, and I don't really know why," Walker confesses. But she guesses that the military framework provides a kind of reason for compliance that is somehow easier for the young cons to stomach.

Another theory offered by proponents is that marching is an equalizer: even a kid with a severe intellectual deficit can achieve a perfect score on the parade ground. This could be the first time he has ever felt a sense of achievement from something honest.

###

***The Colonel: It was nothing, really. Just behaviour that's not tolerated at Level Four...***

The little that I know about the "very bad day" they're having inside the fence has mostly been gleaned from Walker's cryptic references during several conversations. I know there was some kind of trouble in the senior dorm last night. I know that I saw, from the claustrophobic corridor that runs like a spine through Turnaround's cramped quarters, two faces peering through the letter-size glass panels of isolation cells. Why? "Quite often with kids nearing the end of their sentences, a lot of anxiety builds up," Walker offered vaguely."

(Ah! A siren, approaching, the OPP rushing in from Orillia. The blue-and-white screams round the curve--and heads straight on toward Horseshoe Road. Horses in a neighbouring paddock don't look up from their grazing.)

And I know that, after a disciplinary hearing, one boy was "level-busted" for two weeks--barred from temporary-release outings and other Level Four privileges, his graduation thus delayed by at least those two weeks. Several other kids were deprived of access to the radio. For what offences? "There's been a fair amount of turnover [of inmates] lately," Walker allowed, "and there's always a bit of disagreeableness when that happens." About the closest she ever got to a full description of events was the following, which I took to be a taste of the way things look when you work inside the fence:

*... On a normal day if you get half a dozen kids running the track, and some of them start to be silly and keep running after time expires, it could be just spring fever. But if they're trying to get out of view, running behind buildings, it looks a little different. And if at the same time, some kids...become more confrontational with staff--it's time to go to bed and it's, 'No I won't'--it gets to be a different kind of environment. You have to ask, am I seeing something that is growing into a bigger problem, or is it just normal adolescent behaviour?... A kid gets bad news, gets angry and punches the wall, well, the problem may be dealt with by a staff member and the situation is defused. A kid might get angry and push somebody. There are times when it goes beyond what would be acceptable. And then you have to make a decision....*

But what did this kid, the one who was level-busted, *do*?

Finally, she gave a little. One thing, a serious thing, was that this kid, who had been at Bluewater Youth Centre near Goderich when a riot broke out there in 1996, had last night uttered something that could be construed as a threat of history repeating itself here. Threats of any kind are not tolerated at Turnaround.

And why was it necessary that I leave during these proceedings? It was just, Walker said, that she needed to concentrate on what was happening.

I start my engine and head south, having been graced, in the hour's wait, neither by evidence of trouble nor by flashes of insight. Walker, like everyone else I've been meeting, has focused hard on making sure I see the bright side--troubled kids being helped through hard times, kids grateful for the hand up. What I was not to see was evidence of the dark side--kids whose lives have taken a hard road from which they may never turn.

Which is understandable, considering the popularity of the dark view. Media coverage of young offenders in general--and Turnaround in particular--is mostly harsh. Judging by politicians' frenzied efforts to be seen as tough on youth crime, public opinion is clear: sentences aren't long enough, security isn't tight enough, jails aren't grim enough. Too many kids get away with murder. Teach them a lesson. If they won't learn, toss away the key.

As the chief psychologist at TYAC admonished me: "The public hates young offenders. Have you noticed?"

###

***Q: You're in here because a man died. How does that make you feel?***

***A: Survival of the fittest, you know? That's what it was back then, you know? It's not that my crime was premeditated or nothing, I was just living every day for the day. And it just happened that day that, you know, survival of the fittest, man. Unfortunately, someone didn't survive, but, you know, that's the way things just go. I gotta look back at that now, you know? And realize how messed up I was..., you know? If I don't, I'll be in this place the rest of my life.***

This new memory (surfacing as I hit traffic on the 400 near Barrie) is from my visit to Sprucedale, a couple of weeks ago. A few minutes before the conversation, I had been out in the sun, sitting on the bleachers, watching a ball game, listening to young happy voices ("C'mon, Teddy ... C'mon Louis, smash it, bro' ... Don't go home, I wanna hit again"). But this was dinner (ground-beef "steak", mashed potatoes, soggy peas and carrots), and nothing ordinary about it. Each of my table companions had helped to kill someone--a passer-by in a drive-by "survival of the fittest" shooting, a gas-station attendant in a robbery.

***Q: Will you commit crime again, when you get out?***

***Gas-station killer: Never.***

***Drive-by killer: I can't say never, man. My plan is never to commit a crime but I can't judge the future. But I know I have changed. I used to live for the day. Now I live for the future.***

***Gas: I know I never will. I have a daughter now, and a wife. I can say never. Yes, it will be hard, but never.***

***Drive: It's hard, man, straight up. I'll just take one day at a time.***

Steve Slaven, the Sprucedale unit manager, told me he has enough faith in the drive-by guy's future to describe the young man as his "friend." The latter's transformation from "an unproductive, entrenched, violent criminal character, so full of hate he would come at you just for looking at him," is a source of great satisfaction to Slaven.

Places like this would be seriously understaffed if there were no optimists in the world, willing to stare down the statistics and think the best of every kid charged to their care. All the same, Slaven said he would lay no more than sixty-to-forty on his young friend's success at making a fresh start outside the fence. The gas-station guy? Seventy-to-thirty: his criminal record was shorter, and he has a strong family connection--including wife and daughter.

But the memory of dinner with the two killers (drowning out federal justice minister Anne McLellan on the car radio as she explains her plan to replace the Young Offenders Act with something new that will somehow emphasize prevention while sending more kids to adult prison) is not focused on the conversation itself. It's the memory of an unsettling moment that came later, when I transcribed my tape recording of the dinner.

I had been called away from the cafeteria table briefly and accidentally left the recorder on. Now, from the period of my absence, I listened to two voices I almost failed to recognize--and words that, despite replaying them dozens of times at various speeds, I simply could not decipher. The interlude lasted only a few seconds. It began with a "Yo," I think: the drive-by guy said something, the other replied, and although the words were inaudible, it was the sudden change of tone--to something distinct but not quote definable: mocking? malevolent? conspiratorial?--that jarred me. I felt as if I was listening to the muttered vernacular of another world?. Suddenly, one of them tapped the tape recorder and right away, all was intelligible once more.

***Drive [distinctly, right into the mike]: This guy's a very nice guy, though.***

***Gas [stifling a giggle]: Yeah.***

***Drive [sincerely]: I really appreciate the work he's doing for us, putting this out into the community and stuff. I'm very serious.***

Perhaps, in this surreal flash, I glimpsed the dark side, the life behind the recidivism numbers, the tough, cunning culture that may be stifled during incarceration but usually survives to thrive outside the fence.

Or perhaps it was merely a private moment, something innocent between friends, followed by a harmless joke. But another memory surfaces, from a world slightly nearer home. It's a January conversation with a young man I have known since he was a baby, a troubled boy who in the New Year's spirit told me confidently and entirely plausibly of his triumph over addiction and his plans for the future. I believed him with all my heart. Last month, he was arrested and charged with a pharmacy break-in. He has a loving intact family, a high-school diploma, a sound intellect and strong body. And how much dare I bet on his future success? Would I have him live in my home?

More memories from Sprucedale arise: a boy half-lying in a chair in a unit lounge, staring into space as he was addressed, sweat on his brow, a shiver in his voice. "Brain damage, maybe solvents," speculated Slaven. "We're awaiting a ct scan result." I remember the exhilaration on another boy's face as he spoke of the easy money he'd won by crime, money for drink and weed and new shoes, money to "take a girl out to dinner, or to rent a hotel room for the night or a limo," money like many honest people twice his age have never seen. Outside the fence, can anything compete with the thought of such money?

So, what? Let statistics rule sensibilities? Throw the kids away and let them rot? No! cries Barbara Hill, director of policy development for the John Howard Society of Ontario. This province already has two and a half times the youth-incarceration rate of Quebec, she says--indicating that something is wrong with our efforts to prevent crime and provide alternatives to jail. That's where the energy should go, she says from her Kingston office: "I'm not saying there are no kids who need the chance to cool down a bit, but we shouldn't do it [jail them] for punishment, we should do what's best for the kids and for a safer community."

What's very best, according not just to reformists like Hill but to most researchers, is to target at-risk children from an early age, preventing crime by improving kids' chances. By now, an impressive body of research has demonstrated the crime-prevention success of multifaceted programs delivered in preschools, schools, parenting projects, behaviour-disorder clinics. The federal government recognized this in a small way last June with its thirty-two-million-dollar-a-year commitment to community crime-prevention programs.

And what could the provincial governments do? U of T criminologist Tony Doob says one clear answer shines out of the research. "Kids who have a lousy experience in schools, and who are failing, are more likely to drop out and more likely to get into delinquency. So, do something creative in the schools. Give them more resources, more responsibility, make school a better experience for these kids." It doesn't help that under the so-called zero-tolerance policy on violence in school (initiated by the former ndp government), a kid caught in a schoolyard fight is liable to land in court and out of school. "It encourages schools to kick kids out and dump them onto the police and the justice system," says Doob, "instead of working on the problem in the school. If the schools had the money that the justice system wastes it would be simple, but this government is at war with the schools."

As for the idea that the threat of--or experience of--a stiff jail sentence will deter a teen criminal, researchers as well as jail staff say that most adolescents are too impulsive to consider that they may get caught, and caught again. In fact, studies show that getting arrested--and thus involved with the corrections system--hugely increases the likelihood that a kid will reoffend. This suggests that every reasonable effort should go to diverting a kid from the system--rather than "teaching him a lesson."

After all, as Doob puts it, most young criminals simply "grow out" of crime.

###

***T: I'm 18 now. If I commit another crime I'll be charged as an adult. I need to finish high school.***

As I turn onto my own street, I think of T again and the day we met in the cafeteria of the Learning Enrichment Foundation, a sprawling minicity in the industrial heart of York. " The LEF provides a base for Turnaround's community follow-up program, known as Aftercare. T was just checking in there, and wouldn't be in Aftercare long, because by the time he got his sentence review he had just four weeks left to serve. Unlike most young offenders, he would serve no probation after his release; the trial judge, looking at T's record of twenty-one offences, rich with breaches of court orders, had seen no point in yet another probation order.

On his orientation tour of the job-training and educational programs, T decided to enrol in forklift training and to try for another high-school credit through independent learning. At lunch, he acknowledged that the real test of his commitment to clean up would come not here and now, but on his return home, to the streets of his lost youth.

That reality--the difference between what's possible inside the fence and what's possible outside--is the reason Aftercare exists. T won't be a good test case because his transition period is so short. But most Turnaround inmates have to do as much as a year's probation after release, which provides time for staff to work with graduate and family, time for easing into a school or finding a job. Time to figure out a new way to live.

Aftercare is a distinguishing feature of Turnaround. It consists of the services of three counsellors (average case load: about ten, and rising) plus the facilities and services of the LEF in Toronto and of Bartimaeus Inc., a province-wide children's and youth services organization. For those released from the permanent youth jails, aftercare is the probation officer (average case load: seventy-four). There's no logical reason that Turnaround should have the resources for this added dimension, but it's all part of the experiment. The idea is to see whether the recidivism rate can be maintained--or reduced--with less time in custody and less expense to the taxpayer.

An integrated aftercare program was one of several modifications that a government task force made to the Tories' primitive boot-camp style of campaign rhetoric. Another was a serious research plan to test the experimental program's effectiveness. An impeccably credentialed Carleton University team is comparing Turnaround's program elements with those proven effective in other settings, and a consulting company will compare the camp's recidivism scores--and before-and-after psychological test results--against those of a strictly comparable control group.

And what might the numbers say? The University of Montreal's Marc Le Blanc bluntly assures me that statistically speaking, the vast bulk of the kids I have encountered during these weeks will go on committing crimes at least until they're about thirty. After that, many of them will remain "burdens on society"--drug-dependant, on welfare, unemployed, whatever.

What, I ask him, can turn these kids around? (High school credits? treatment groups? aftercare? parade-ground achievement?) "A good girlfriend, or a good boss," Le Blanc says. "We don't necessarily know they are better than treatment, but we know that these factors are more important than anything in a corrections facility."

And for those not so lucky? "A very small minority will commit many homicides; a very small minority will commit just the occasional serious crime."

"And the vast bulk will go on offending for a long time?"

"*Oui*.. It's like, if you have prostate cancer at fifty you will have it for twenty-five years or so, and you will probably not die of that."

"It's a depressing picture."

"It's a good challenge, yes. But if you treat them and save one, then that's maybe a murder prevented, a rape prevented, a person not victimized in some way. At least you can save a few. That's better than nothing."

###

After my return from Turnaround, I call the Aftercare centre to arrange the agreed follow-up interview with T. Sorry, the Aftercare director says, T's sentence expired a few days ago, and he's back home with his family. No, I can't have his phone number--Turnaround policy. When last heard from, T was working full-time as a labourer, his father strongly opposed to a return to school. How will he do against the numbers outside the fence? I probably will never know, and--since he's an adult now--even the Turnaround people probably won't hear if he's rearrested.

And in this, at last, what seems reflects what is. The shrouded future of T, the shrouded futures of young criminals generally, is consistent not just with the clean-slate spirit of the Young Offenders Act, but with the unresolvable questions that every youth-jail worker faces daily. How many of their charges will reoffend? How often? How seriously? For how long? Above all, which boys? They just don't know.

All they can do, and must do, is believe in the possibility of every kid. To feed such huge optimism, they draw on the mythic success stories they've all heard. "I tell the staff, there's always a way of working with a kid, even the most resistant," Turnaround's Brad DeLong told me. Many years ago, he said, when he was a line staff worker at a youth jail in his native New Brunswick, DeLong escorted a group of young criminals to clean up his mother's drive-in theatre. "Well, this kid came up to my mom recently, and he said, 'You won't remember me but Brad had me here fifteen years ago,' and he said, 'You tell Brad I've been clean fifteen years.' And I remember him. I remember his long black hair; he was a little bugger, obsessed with cars; he stole a lot of cars. He was with us for six months, and he made some gains... Young offenders are not monsters. Some people want to believe they are monsters, but they're children."

For all the children's sake, the rest of us need to stop worrying so much about when, where and for how long kids get locked up. The jails are in reasonably good hands, and they're not going to get much better--whether or not experiments like Turnaround succeed and multiply. We should start worrying about prevention, alternatives and universal aftercare. As for the optimists who work in the system and keep faith in the children, I hope they stick it out. My own son is nearly four. If, God forbid, he ever finds himself surrounded by high fences, I hope he catches the eye of someone willing to believe in him.

*Copyright (c) Ivor Shapiro 1998*

[\[Home\]](#)