

**July 11, 2009**

## **Budget Cuts Eroding Progress in Juvenile Justice**

By **[PETER S. GOODMAN](#)**

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Her first night inside the razor wire at the state juvenile prison came as a 14-year-old in the mid-1970s, when she was locked up for running away from home. Her next experience came the following decade, when she began work as a correctional officer. As Velvet McGowan tells it, care was a word not then in the lexicon of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice. Teenagers were warehoused like problematic inventory, with as many as 80 crammed into spaces built for 40. Social services were meager. Violent outbreaks occurred daily.

Two decades later, Ms. McGowan oversees the girls' prison, where she focuses on turning around troubled lives. New programs have expanded counseling and education, cutting the repeat offender rate. New facilities have extricated the state from a federal lawsuit brought in response to once appalling conditions. But what South Carolina built over many years in eradicating its shameful past is being undermined by the deep economic recession. In the last year, the state has cut the financing for its juvenile justice system by one-fifth, forcing 285 layoffs and the closure of several facilities, including five group homes that focused on counseling.

The department has scrapped a program that helped paroled youngsters find jobs, unleashing them into a state with 11.6 percent unemployment. It has canceled state financing for 40 after-school centers for teenagers, where they get help with their homework, receive mentoring and take part in activities during hours when children are most likely to stray into trouble. It has trimmed the ranks of social workers to 20, from 36.

"I'm scared," said Ms. McGowan, dabbing tears with a tissue. "I don't want to relive the '80s through a budget cut."

Across the country, depleted coffers have prompted state and local officials to pare programs intended as alternatives to the mere incarceration of juvenile lawbreakers. In Tennessee, state legislators voted last month to close a wilderness activity camp. In Louisiana, a boot camp aimed at deterring young people from crime has been shut down. In California, alternative facilities focused on counseling are threatened from San Jose to Sacramento.

For South Carolina, cuts are particularly unsettling given its history. For a dozen years ending in 2003, a federal judge supervised the department under the settlement of a class-action lawsuit arising from overcrowded prison conditions. Since then, the system has stopped treating youthful offenders as hardened convicts, instead confronting them as social problems through new programs that attack the underlying causes of juvenile crime — like dysfunctional homes, drug abuse and difficulties in school.

The department's director, William R. Byars Jr., a former family court justice, has overseen many of the changes. In his days on the bench, he fretted over the condition of the juvenile justice system, regretfully sending children to the prison then known as "Little Vietnam."

"It was a dangerous place," Judge Byars said. "Kids were in here with mental deficiencies. You had kids in here for status offenses, for cutting school or running away. They were all mixed together, because our system was not designed to ask, 'What is the best situation for this child?'"

Under Judge Byars's direction, the department has focused on drastically decreasing the numbers of young people held inside the razor wire at the prison, shipping hundreds out to wilderness camps and group homes. The number held at the prison has dropped to fewer than 400, from more than 1,000 in the mid-1990s, while the number held in alternative settings has increased by a similar magnitude.

The department has set up a network of so-called intensive supervision officers who get to know the youngsters and their families before they are released, and then visit frequently to stay on top of problems. A recent department review found that only 12 percent of youths monitored by these officers wound up back in the system a year after their release, compared with 21 percent among those lacking intensive guidance.

The success of the reforms has been “truly remarkable,” wrote Karen L. Chinn, a consultant selected by the court to monitor conditions. But the cuts of the last year “have already begun to unravel the progress,” Ms. Chinn said.

Judge Byars insists his department will not return to warehousing juveniles. If more cuts threaten to return the prison to overcrowded levels, he will release those on misdemeanor offenses to keep numbers down, he said.

For Ms. McGowan, talk of sliding backward is deeply personal. Like many of the 27 girls that fill the prison she now oversees, she slipped into trouble after a family crisis. She was 14, and her mother had just died — or so she thought. In truth, the dead woman had been her grandmother, her family told her. Her real mother was someone she knew as her sister, a taciturn woman she did not much like.

“The most precious person of my life has been taken away from me,” Ms. McGowan said. “Nobody sat me down and talked to me about that. Nobody thought to ask me what was going on in my heart.” She repeatedly ran away from home, was caught and sentenced to weekends at the prison. She occupied a hard mattress inside a low, dimly lighted concrete block building. Most of the other girls were, like her, African-American and the product of some sort of unaddressed trauma.

When Ms. McGowan was 22 and working as a restaurant cashier, she heard the juvenile prison was hiring. The children overflowed the facilities, some sleeping on pairs of bunk beds stuffed into rooms no bigger than 8 feet by 12 feet and some on mattresses covering the floors. At night, she was sometimes alone, hoping no fight would break out, often finding the inmates tattooing one another with smuggled paper clips or lighting cigarettes by pressing them into bare electrical wiring.

“It was horrible,” she said. “It was like just trying to survive. The only thing we were supposed to provide was security, custody and control. Sometimes we’d sneak a talk. You know, ‘How are you doing? What are you feeling?’ It made me angry, like we were all animals.”

Today, all of the officers on Ms. McGowan’s staff are trained in counseling. The girls gather every morning in small groups to discuss their worries or whatever might be on the mind of a teenager waking up in prison. A special transitional house for girls nearing release is meant to model life outside. In place of the stall showers and toilets found in the dorms, the house has two private bathrooms complete with bathtubs, the tiles painted with colorful fish and butterflies. One girl does the cooking for the day using a menu the girls create together.

Each girl receives \$2,000 in virtual money a month and must write checks simulating payments for rent, electricity and food. If she is late, she pays a fine. She can earn money by doing extra chores. If she runs out of money, she loses privileges, like time watching television. Britney, an 18-year-old in the house, was paying an extra \$500 a month to cover the costs of diapers and food for her 7-month-old daughter, who was delivered in prison. Her mother was looking after the baby until Britney’s release.

That moment was less than 24 hours away, and Britney was both exhilarated and apprehensive. In and out of the juvenile justice system since she was 12 — mostly for running away after battles with her mother — she was about to become responsible for her own child. “I stayed up on my bed last night thinking you all made me feel like you all cared,” Britney told the group one morning.

An intensive supervision officer had already held counseling sessions between Britney and her mother using a videoconference system. She planned to monitor closely how they were getting along. The officer was to take Britney on a tour of community colleges (she had earned a G.E.D. inside the prison), where she hoped to begin a career as a nurse practitioner. Britney was to be enrolled in parenting classes. “They got everything planned out,” Britney said.

Still, the adults were anxious, cognizant that the end of Britney's prison life was the beginning of her next incarnation as another jobless teenage single mother. "Are you nervous about going home?" Ms. McGowan asked her. "Yeah," Britney said. "I'm a little nervous about being free, because I've been here so long." The girls lined up to go to school, a complex of classrooms inside the wire, as a guard administered pat-downs. Ms. McGowan watched Britney submit for a final day.

"This is a child we've really got to check in with," she said. "It's really crucial that we stay connected." Yet the finances needed to maintain that connection were slipping. Inside the prison, the attention given to each child was being diluted by staff cuts. "We don't want to go back to how it was," Ms. McGowan said. "We were just so heartless."