

## THE PLAGUE OF FATHERLESSNESS

By Ronald E. Johnson, Ph.D.

A common point of focus among speakers at conferences for juvenile detention personnel is a list of characteristics of juvenile offenders. The list includes such outward characteristics as breaks curfew, wears baggy pants, uses drugs and/or alcohol, has two or more tattoos, is below peers in school, habitually makes poor grades and is truant. Conference speakers also prep juvenile correctional personnel on techniques for identifying, confiscating and coping with illegal drugs. Officials are also taught how to “take down” aggressive juveniles, how to interrogate, how to prepare documents for court and how to inform parents of the deaths of their sons. Court records contain thousands of profiles of juvenile offenders. The above items are usually listed. Typical juvenile offenders share so many common characteristics that police artists can render profile drawings of probable offenders based on crime scene evidence.

Only until recently have educators and criminal justice personnel begun to narrow their profiles of juvenile offenders to the common item of fatherlessness and begun to focus on its implications and challenges for schools, homes, detention facilities, and faith-based rescue units. **Evidence verifies that most juveniles who are incarcerated or assigned to disciplinary alternative schools share the one basic characteristic of fatherlessness.** As used here, the term includes youth whose biological fathers are usually absent or youth who are without regular paternal oversight from a nurturing adult male.

Public officials have come to the realization that something drastic has to be done about the state of fatherlessness in America. Society must either build more detention facilities or implement a program that is an alternative to current practices by parents, educators, clergy, law enforcement officials and criminal justice institutions. America obviously is not adequately addressing the issue of fatherless youth through typical institutions which have contact with fatherless juveniles: single parent homes, public schools, law enforcement departments, detention facilities, and in some instances, faith based programs. The recidivism rate among juvenile detention programs is far too high for officials honestly to use the term, “Juvenile Correctional facilities.” **The truth is that most fatherless juvenile offenders are not being corrected.**

A Tarrant Count Juvenile Prosecutor said, “I never had a kid come before me who had both parents at home.” FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover said, “I never met a kid in jail who went fishing with his dad.” A special education psychologist in central Texas remarked, “Most of the kids I see do not have fathers at home.” A south Texas deputy sheriff observed, “Most male prison inmates did not have the benefit of daily oversight by their fathers during youth.” A nationally known expert on juvenile offenders said, “Most juvenile offenders come from homes where the father is absent or abusive.” A school superintendent said, “Most males assigned to disciplinary alternative schools or correctional institutions pillow their heads nightly without having had a meaningful conversation with their fathers.”

**The big question is, “What is to be done?”** Continuation of status quo will likely produce situations in America similar to those in some metropolitan areas of Brazil where thousands of fatherless youth live on city streets until murdered by peers or “eliminated” by private or public officials who grow weary of harassment by roaming bands of hooligans.

We can either deal with the issue from the perspective of more effective capture-and-retain measures, and/or we can look at the reality of fatherlessness in America and collectively design simultaneous programs to train boys to be better fathers, girls to be more selective in who fathers their children, and equip foster parents, pastors and educators (in detention facilities and in public and private schools) to address the consequences and ramifications of fatherlessness. Obviously, no one institution can provide a total remedy, but **each applicable institution must develop creative programs especially designed to compensate for fatherlessness.**

Such programs will likely include faith-based neighborhood task forces trained to attract fatherless youth into after-school seminars that deal with such issues as rejection, anger, bitterness, forgiveness, restitution, conflict resolution, nutrition, literacy and career preparation. Legislatures will likely authorize operation of for-profit and non-profit sectarian and secular alternate schools (both punitive and none-punitive) with specific curriculum and programs that compensate for fatherlessness in academics, social relationships, self-image, and employment skills. Detention facilities will likely operate their own educational programs rather than contract with local public schools with their standard curriculum and philosophy, or contract with public and faith-based entities especially equipped to address the soul-needs of boys without fathers.

Interviews with fatherless boys and with educators who specialize in “fatherless recovery programs” substantiate the argument that **continuation of status quo spells disaster for our culture as we know it.** Continuation of present practices will produce horrific consequences for our grandchildren! We have only to look at trends to plot the probable devastating course on which America is plunging! We have no choice but to demand, design and deploy a specific, nationwide plan for recovering angry, fatherless boys left behind!

An effective recovery program must be different than the current, secular, punitive approach which operates on the false premise that an offender made uncomfortable by punishment and confinement will want to return to regular public school classrooms and behave. Recidivism rates invalidate that approach. Even though restraint and punishment are legitimate techniques, they fall short of addressing the root issue of youth without fathers, which drives juveniles to delinquent behavior and incarceration. Correctional facilities which focus primarily on punishment and confinement can never be successful as long as the institutions fail to address the deep longings of the souls of youth without fathers. The issue is compounded by the fact that punishment and confinement alone are no longer effective as they were during previous eras when both parents were present in homes to support law enforcement officials. Prior to 1962, juveniles were shamed, spanked and re-directed by fathers who led their homes at least with some degree of moral, Judeo-Christian principles. However, contemporary youth without fathers are not being guided and restrained by virtues, principles and morals common of responsible adults. They are at the mercy of the inadequate “school of hard knocks.” Thus the deep, unmet longings of the souls of fatherless youth drive negative behavior that requires incarceration. America is at critical mass. **Institutions must go beyond the use of punishment as the central ingredient for correcting delinquent, fatherless youth.**

## **FATHERLESSNESS IS A PLAGUE EATING AWAY AT THE CORE OF AMERICA!**

Historically, three basic institutions have been responsible for training American youth: Home, School, and Church. A fourth institution, Juvenile Correctional Institutions, has emerged of necessity to fill the void of the three basic institutions which have in general defaulted. This fourth entity is tasked to bring social order out of juvenile chaos...somehow to make up for the failure of the three primary care-giving institutions originally tasked to prepare youth for responsible adulthood.

Basically, juvenile correctional facilities and programs are tasked to correct juvenile delinquency caused by **fatherlessness**, yet are not effectively addressing the **root causes** which stem from the absence of adequate paternal oversight, causing juvenile justice officials to agonize over unacceptable recidivism rates.

Single parent homes now constitute half of U.S households; thus millions of juveniles are not under the watch care of responsible fathers.

Schools attempt to address academics without giving attention to the consequences of fatherlessness. Zero tolerance and disciplinary alternative placement are needed, but do not constitute the cure.

Churches reference the Biblical admonition that “A child left to himself brings shame to his mother...and is a reproach to his father.” Yet few churches effectively address the condition of fatherlessness.

Juvenile correctional institutions may be the last place of hope for fatherless, angry boys and vulnerable girls. If so, juvenile correctional programs need refocusing in such a manner as to provide effective compensation for the condition of fatherlessness. The challenge is how to provide the essential components of good parenting, adequate schooling and relevant spiritual focus within an effective correctional detention program that protects society while hopefully helping fatherless teenagers cope with life and prepare for responsible adulthood.

FATHERLESSNESS results in being untethered, unhinged, untrained, undisciplined, unbonded and unfocused on **the essential ingredients of life involving body, soul and spirit**. These three essential elements require attention if juveniles are to be reclaimed from delinquency. Detention that focuses primarily on punitive restraint will always produce a high recidivism rate. Effective juvenile correctional programs must dare to venture into the arenas vacated by parents, schools and churches if true reclamation is to take place. That may be perceived as unfair, unreasonable, impractical or impossible. But, none-the-less, it is essential until and while legislatures and faith based entities find ways to rebuild a culture that has produced fatherless children whose single parent moms cry out in desperation for help!

Help derives from institutions which understand that every individual is composed of the **three essential components of body, soul and spirit**. Effective fatherhood ascertains that all three of these areas are nurtured during childhood and adolescence. The conscientious father makes sure the home provides nutritional food and exercise to build strong bodies, makes sure the child receives an

adequate education, and assures that the child embraces virtues and principles that are foundational to wisdom and character. The absence of attention to these essential elements is to produce juvenile delinquency. Therefore, remedy must, of necessity, address what parents, teachers and clergy are failing to provide for juveniles assigned to correctional institutions.

Each essential element (**body, soul and spirit**) brings into play specific components which are the fabric of individuals. Each is dependent on, and essential to, proper function of the others. A weakness in one affects the others. An anemic or undernourished body affects neurotransmitters. A soul abused by physical and emotional attacks affects the will to survive with dignity. A spirit without hope leads to despondency, lethargy, and loss of life purpose. Effective juvenile reclamation programs will focus on building or rebuilding the interdependent fabric of body, soul and spirit so the juvenile experiences wellness to such an extent that he or she can reenter society as a balanced, functioning person free of the negative consequences of fatherlessness.

Objective assessment of the circumstances which bring youth into correctional facilities compels attention to the basic causes of delinquent behavior...the lack of appropriate paternal oversight during formative growth years. Casting blame at single parent mothers does no good for the mother, child, teacher, probation officer, jailer or church youth department leader. Nor will good result by blaming public school officials exclusively. Neither will positive results emerge by castigating churches for failing to compensate for fatherlessness. The bottom line is that the last bastion of hope for thousands of teenagers rests in juvenile correctional programs! What, then, should be done? What can be done? What will be done? Remedy is currently in a defining process as legislatures, courts, educators, juvenile justice officials, clergy, faith based entities and parents assess what went wrong and how it can be corrected by the people tasked to deal with fatherless youth.

When officials look at the outward symptoms of fatherlessness, they see anger, bitterness, desperation, victim mentality, self-focus, hopelessness, low self-worth, meager aspirations, lack of bonding, careless moral behavior, low academic performance, social misconduct, etc. Juveniles who overcome these negative manifestations encounter adults who help compensate for the juveniles' absence of paternal oversight. Effective compensation programs involve adult attention to body, soul, and spirit. The reasonable conclusion is that juvenile correctional programs have to emulate effective efforts to compensate for the lack of paternal oversight of **body** (nutritional and health issues), **soul** (academic competencies), and **spirit** (exposure to virtues and principles that produce wisdom).

Compensation occurs through oversight by positive male role models, academic studies in virtue-based curriculum, individualized studies that enable rapid make up for scholastic failures, restraint of sensual appetites, inclusion of nutritional food, minerals and vitamins that rebuild neurotransmitters impaired by junk food, spiritual therapy for paternal neglect and physical/emotional abuse, and involvement in noble causes to divert attention from self and provide a purpose driven life.

Obviously, most juvenile detention/correctional institutions will have to undergo restructuring, refocusing, and staff development. The purpose of this seminar is to get you started in that direction. Recovering Angry, Fatherless Boys Through 33 Laws of Recovery provides an overview of concepts with which to design and implement a paradigm shift in juvenile justice and correctional programs.

Dr. Ronald E. Johnson is CEO and Chairman of the Board of Paradigm Accelerated Charter School. Correspondence should be directed to P.O. Box 200 Dublin, Texas 76446, [Learn@pacworks.com](mailto:Learn@pacworks.com), or PH: 254-445-4272.