



“Breaking Down the Walls”
The Community Correction System for Juvenile
Delinquency

Inspired by a case from the People's Court of Xiangzhou,
Zhuhai

International Department, the Affiliated High School of SCNU

NO.3

Leader: Xu Xitong

Members: Xu Ge, Huang Yulong, Liang Jianing

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Introduction

By analyzing a specific case involving five boys, our group examined the topic of the juvenile community correction system in China. Changes in the attitudes and behaviors of the boys reflects both the positive potential and limitations of changing approaches to juvenile justice in China. While some of the boys seemed penitent and willing to turn their lives around, questions still lingered about the overall efficacy of the program and areas in which it might be improved.

The Volunteering Activity

During the Christmas holiday, our group along with five other volunteers, participated in an activity with the Welfare Institute to assist children with special needs and five teens who were granted probation. The activity was in the afternoon, and so the volunteers and the boys were tasked with preparation during the morning. A morning filled with the smell of glue wasn't that pleasant, but Ivy as well as the other volunteers were satisfied cooperating with the boys and contributing to the team.

Ivy, as the host, was initially quite nervous about the show, worrying that the schedule might go wrong, and the boys might not cooperate. Though the rehearsal wasn't perfect, it was much better than its beginning: The social workers and a teen gave Ivy plenty of suggestions; another teen kept practicing nunchakus from the morning until the performance. Although he still made a couple of minor mistakes during the performance, his charm overweighed any flaws. Because of the children's disabilities, many assumed they could not fully concentrate on the performance, and the expectations for the program were not high. However, almost all the kids fully participated in the show. They jumped off their chairs and danced with the five boys

singing on the stage. At the end of the performance, the atmosphere was boisterous and warm.



The boys were playing the ukuleles and singing. Photo by Ivy Xu.

Changes to the Juvenile Correction System

Currently, China's juvenile justice system is turning toward new, diverse forms of correction, including educational, assistance-based and mandatory correction, and will apply them to juvenile delinquents depending on the severity of their crimes. In Xiangzhou District of Zhuhai, the project of community correction for juveniles mainly works alongside the Youth Health Promotion Association, a governmental procurement service. The correction program mainly focuses on education in rules and training them in self-restraint. The organization also attaches great attention to individual education, including psychological counseling and an integrated assessment following one-to-one discussions. In terms of employment, society will encourage them to pursue work. It is less attentive to underlying social causes of crime. In terms of employment, these youths are encouraged to pursue work, but the program itself does not directly connect them to potential job opportunities or fight the stigma around hiring those with criminal records. While this focus on

transforming individuals from the inside out seems to work with some, its overall effectiveness is far from clear.

Among the five 17-year-old boys we mainly targeted, who robbed other teens of their cell phones and money three times in total, family issues are noticeable common threads. The mandatory counseling mentioned above frequently brought these to the surface. One of these teens was treated wrongly by his parents, who still regarded him as a naïve child; another's parents were divorced so that he lacked the company of his father during childhood; still another's answer to the question "Have you ever been prized by anyone?" was a simple "Never." Meanwhile, the remaining two were compulsive smokers, but their parents never banned such inappropriate behavior. Everyone has their own issues, of course, and the task of these new correctional approaches is to change that sense of loss into one of growth. However, it remains unclear if merely attending to socially taboo habits or psychological pain will lower crime.



The boys were attending the psychological consultation. Photo by Volunteer Lin.

On August 2, 2019, Ivy had an interview with one of the five boys and another volunteer to better understand his inner thoughts. The following dialogues leads some insight into their thinking:

Ivy: What is the biggest change the community correction system has provided for you?

The teen: An awareness of the law. I regret what I did. So, if next time someone punches me, I will definitely not fight back. Instead, I will call the police. As long as he does not pummel me to death, I will just endure until the cops come.

Ivy: Wow! So, are you studying now? Or working?

The teen: I am now working as a part-time food deliverer, and I will go to university in September.

Ivy: Okay. Are you living with your mother right now?

The teen: Yes. And my father is in Zhuhai most of the time. He used to go away on business very frequently.

During the first few minutes, he spoke with a stammer and never looked Ivy in the eyes. Gradually, his true personality came through—his sense of humor and sincerity. After learning a few rules from the monthly correctional activity, he learned how to solve problems and seemed to see the error of his past ways. Rather than fooling around, he looked for a job. During the talk, Ivy saw the motivation in his eyes and felt that he will become someone who contributes to society.

Prospects and Room for Improvement

The data from a court in Zhuhai shows that from 2014 to July of 2019, the total number of juvenile criminal sentences was 343, and the number of those with non-custodial sentences was 110. Thus, the five teens were fortunate to be given the option of mandatory community service instead of being placed in juvenile prison. The judge's decision to give them another chance is laudable since it respects their passion to live and their changes toward judges and officers. Given the conditions of juvenile prisons, and the low job prospects for those who have served time in them, moving toward community-service and personal rehabilitation over incarceration

more generally is likely to have positive social and individual benefits. Whether it addresses the deeper causes of crime, from poverty to inequality, is another question.

So far, the increasing amount of telephone communication between the parents and officers is commendable, which allows them to learn about their children's schedules. Yet the correction procedures are also inflexible and one-size-fits-all in outlook. More specialized treatment approaches and positive peer mentoring could help in this regard.

However, according to the data from Guangdong Communist Youth League, as of October 2015, there were only 246 youth community correctional social workers in the pilot cities of Guangdong Province and 2,633 volunteers of various types, or 2,879 in total. The number of community correction social workers and volunteers is still insufficient. Overall quality and professional knowledge are weak among these workers. High-quality, talented personnel need to enroll in this system. To achieve the goal, the government must pay more attention to the juvenile community correction system, since, as an old saying goes, "If the youth are strong, the nation will be strong."

References

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