A System Created for Adolescents

Transitioning from childhood into adulthood is something every human in our society encounters. This in between stage is known as adolescence. During this foreign stage of having an undefined role in our society, adolescents are expected to no longer act like children yet they are permitted from having the same privileges or rights as adults. All the while, these thirteen through eighteen year olds are faced with situations that challenge them to make the right or wrong decisions. A system was established specifically for those adolescents who make wrong choices and become involved in deviant behavior. Adolescents are then left with the question of where and how long they should be retained for committing illegal acts that are also committed by adults such as theft, drug and alcohol abuse, and even gang association. It is important to recognize the different factors that contribute to deviant behavior such as socialization, juvenile codes, courts, and education in order to understand the problem with delinquency.

Juvenile delinquents and the choices they make cannot be appropriately understood without considering the social contexts that they are associated with. Each individual comes from a variety of socialization backgrounds so it is important to recognize them and compare the diverse outcomes. Values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms are the concepts that describe our society in the way that it is constructed. It is safe to say that our society has become immune to media and what it portrays. For instance, when the six o’clock news only reports the story of a juvenile who got possession of a gun and took it to school, it does not correctly represent the juvenile population as a whole. These dramatic fallacies create misconceptions on the view of delinquency. Media that is stereotypical in the coverage of crime and delinquency helps “generate and reinforce fear, anxiety, terror, hatred, admiration, prejudice, intolerance, bigotry, bias and racism” (David Kidd-Hewitt 1995:10) for the rest of society. In reality, in 2014 there were 20,700 arrests made of persons under the age of eighteen for weapons (carrying, possessing, etc.), which was a 34% decrease from 2010 (OJJDP, 2015). If media were to make more reports on the positive, crime rates going down, rather than the negative then societies values, beliefs, attitudes and norms that surround the concept of delinquency would not be perceived as fearful or intolerant. In order for society’s concept of juvenile delinquency to be significantly altered, social changes would have to occur. As previously mentioned, the change in media and what it depicts could easily be a beneficial social change. Although affiliation with social classes cannot disappear, if it were to, it would help change the concept of juveniles. Typically, adolescents who are caught in deviant behavior come from families that are in the middle or lower classes. Lower income families do not have the same access to resources such as after school programs or even the decision on what kind of school the child attends. According to research, students who were unsupervised and did not participate in structured after school activities revealed higher antisocial behavior like drinking, theft, and contact with police (Rorie, Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Connell, 2011). If society were to eliminate social classes, the appropriate structure for raising adolescents would be accessible to all and result in less deviant behavior.

The juvenile system was intended to separate adolescents and adults in regards to crime. Separate codes should be retained because it prevents the juvenile from being trailed as an adult yet holds them accountable for their actions. Due to the difference between each case, sometimes it may be hard to decide if all sentencing should be uniform. I believe that unless the adolescent is diagnosed with a mental illness, then the codes should be standardized all across the board. It is crucial for reinforcement to play a role because it is a constant reminder for adolescents of what decisions can be made as well as the consequence that would follow. Although there is always room for revision, not every system created is made to please the opinions of society, that being said, I do not believe revisions should be made. For instance, according to our text, the most common sentencing given to juvenile offenders is probation (Siegel, Welsh 2014). At this age in life, these offenders are still developing in many areas. If they were sent directly to jail in the same ways that adults were, they would go through experiences that could potentially traumatize them and lead to more deviant behavior in the future. Many programs are offered to the offenders so that they are not isolated behind bars. These programs are beneficial because they allow juveniles to receive guidance from an adult and become available to resources they did not have such as help finding jobs or other activities to move forward in. Redefining the concept of juvenile delinquency is not favorable because in my opinion it is not possible. Legally eliminating the concept would leave us unaware of what structure to abide by when it comes to controlling the youth. A status offense is defined as a “noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth’s status as a minor” (OJJDP 2010). Use of alcohol, truancy, violating curfew, and running away from home are some common examples. Eliminating status offenses would not be suitable for our society because we would then socialize generations that think they are allowed to do any action they feel and have no boundaries or consequences. If we have no boundaries, then we are not committed to norms and values, which are the primary source of order in all societies.

The separation of a juvenile and adult court is necessary because circumstances such as age and development are at different levels. Many states do offer rehabilitation programs that are beneficial, but for those who are not as fortunate receive long sentences in juvenile facilities. All states today allow juveniles to be tried as adults in three different ways: concurrent jurisdiction, (certain offences can be in either juveniles or adult courts), statutory exclusion policies (offenses like traffic violations, murder or rape are automatically excluded from juvenile courts), and judicial wavier (hearings are held to decide if the case goes to criminal court or not) (Siegel, Welsh 2014). Procedures like these should be modified in the present juvenile justice system for the reasons that all juveniles should be tried in the juvenile courts. Experts question whether younger juveniles that are transferred to adult courts are competent to be tried as adults. Studies showed that the mental competency of youths under age 16 to stand trial is far below that of similarly charged adults, one study shows that the competency of young offenders is comparable to a mentally impaired adult (Siegel, Welsh 2014). It is important that the system deals with the problem of delinquency in an effective way. Some adjustments that could be made in the juvenile courts are to provide institutions with better conditions. If juvenile detention centers were structured less like adult prisons and more like rehabilitation centers than adolescents would have a better chance of succeeding once or if they are released. Socialization for status offenders does not have to be ruined just because they are held in facilities.

Children are enlisted in the education system for about thirteen or fourteen years of their lives. This time is crucial for developing and figuring out society. All adolescents are required to attend school, but not all have the choice of what school they have to attend. Typically, lower income families who live in zone 2 produce youths that their only option is to attend poorer schools that are segregated by race and income. Depending on the area of each school district, funding is provided based on the number and type of students who attend. If the process of distributing school funding were to change and allowed an equal average amount of money to be distributive among these districts, then students would have an equal opportunity to succeed with the resources provided. For example, if all students had the opportunity to become involved in an organization or program within their school, then they would have less time on their hands to be active in deviant behavior. Resources available play a huge role in deviant behavior and if handed out equally, it could result in lessened youthful misconduct and law violation.

The transition from childhood into adulthood can be a challenging experience for some. The American society tries to help ease this transition by enforcing rules and guidelines that are meant to direct adolescents down the favorable path. This transition might be made easier if adolescents were given role models that were continuously available to guide and support their emotional needs that are not being met in their home. When viewing the problem of juvenile delinquency altogether, the system that was created has pros and cons. Our society is developed through hegemony, which is the idea that the ruling class manipulates the value and norm system of a society so their view becomes the worldview. This being said, we cannot change the concept of delinquency because we cannot eliminate social divisions that begin the day someone is born.

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