USC Institute for Justice and Journalism
Story Behind the Story

"Adult Prisons Harden Teens"
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THE STORY IDEA

Four times a year, the Arizona Department of Corrections puts out a pamphlet called "Who is in prison?" It has everything in it from gender and ethnic distributions to commitment offenses to education levels of inmates. When the pamphlet came out for the quarter ending Dec. 31, 2003, we had just ended a hostage standoff at one of the state's prisons. Two inmates had taken over a watchtower and held two corrections officers hostage. The standoff lasted 15 days. This time, I looked more carefully at the pamphlet than I usually do. Ninety-six inmates were ages 17 and younger. Three of those were females. I wondered: What must it be like to grow up in prison? My original idea was to document the lives of juveniles who had been sentenced to adult prison. But after floating it by my editors, I quickly realized there needed to be more substance. If there wasn't, who would care? I thought back to a murder I had covered nearly a decade before. A 13-year-old boy had shot his classmate – he said it was an accident - then thrown the body in a garbage can – he said he panicked. The killer was sentenced to 22 years in prison. He is 22 now and already has spent two years in maximum security. He'd be out when he was only 36, I realized. His whole life would still be ahead of him. How would he come out?

THE STORY PROPOSAL

The story I proposed was a look at what it really means to society to send juveniles to adult prison. The story would look at what happens to juveniles in adult prison. In a system where there is already a tremendous lack of counseling, education and job training programs, are juveniles getting the rehabilitation services that they will need to function in society once they are released? What happens when these children are released? And should they be given a second chance when they commit crimes so young? On average, these teens serve less than five years in adult prisons. That means the majority of them will be released before they are even legally old enough to drink. Ten years after Arizona and other states made it easier to send juveniles to adult court, was this get-tough-on-crime philosophy really protecting the state's residents?

My intended audience was our newspaper readers. I wanted readers to realize the state was not locking up these kids and throwing away the key. And unless the state changed the services offered both in prison and upon release, these kids would commit future crimes and create future victims. We should all care about that. The story I proposed was a one-day Sunday story with extensive photos and graphics. My vision was that the story would start on the cover and fill two inside pages. My editors accepted my proposal, but over the months, it was fine-tuned a little more. Most significantly, we decided to look nationally to try and find models that appeared to be more successful than what was going on in Arizona. Was there a better way?

THE PROCESS

I started out by asking state corrections officials for a list of all the juveniles currently housed in the state prison. I got back a list of 96 names, with inmate numbers, dates of birth and the commitment offense. I created a database from the list and expanded that to include, among other things, the juvenile's age when the crime was committed, his sentence, the number of disciplinary infractions he had behind bars and how old he would be when he was released from prison. The database took a lot of work to create. Each juvenile had to be entered into DOC's online inmate database. The information I was looking for was in several different places on the DOC web site. Then I had to transfer the information from the prison web site into my database. When I finally had everyone in the database, I averaged the most important information: The average age when the crime was committed (15.6 years); the average sentence for juveniles who were not in for murder (4.5 years); the average age they would be at release (20.7 years).

I juggled the database with breaking news coverage and other projects I was doing for the paper, adding a few kids every time I had some down time. The database, started at the end of May, wasn't completed until the beginning of August. At the same time, I asked DOC to provide me with any recidivism numbers they had. But I asked them to do it in an unusual way. I asked them to break out recidivism for inmates admitted as juveniles. Most recidivism data is based on age at release. But I wanted my research to focus on those who were juveniles when they came into the system, regardless of whether they were released at age 17, 21 or 35. I did this because I was trying to capture the experience of the youth. The first data I got back said the recidivism rate for those admitted as juveniles was 43.4 percent. The recidivism rate for those admitted as adults was 24.5 percent. Wow! Quite a difference. I then asked for a further breakdown of the numbers. I wanted to compare juveniles and adults convicted of violent crimes and juveniles and adults convicted of non-violent crimes. I thought

this might even out the recidivism gap. It didn't. The recidivism rate for minors convicted of violent crimes was twice as high as adults convicted of violent crimes. Overall, minors at admission were three times as likely as adults to come back for a new violent crime within three years. Even juveniles initially sentenced for non-violent crimes were four times as likely as non-violent adults to commit a new violent felony within three years. Why was this?

I began doing extensive Internet research on juveniles in adult prison. I read everything I could find on the subject, jotting down questions and notes to myself as I went along. I found a study done by the Children's Action Alliance on prosecuting juveniles in the adult system. I collected recidivism rates from Arizona's Department of Juvenile Corrections. I read research done on children transferred to adult prisons in Florida and New Jersey. By chance, I found a recidivism study done by the U.S. Department of Justice. That study, I noticed, broke out recidivism rates by age at release. I wondered: If they can break out age at release, couldn't they break out age at admission? I had a colleague who is more adept at computer assisted reporting, download the dataset and crunch it the way I wanted it. Now I had somewhat of a comparison to other states. I also called several states, including Florida, Illinois and California, asking them about current recidivism studies. None of the states tracked data the way I wanted them to. I had to settle for the federal data, which was a couple years old.

One of my editors wanted "take away" on the project. "Show me some place that does it better," he said. Well, re-entry hasn't exactly been the focus of corrections in the United States. It quickly became clear that although some programs showed promise, many efforts were too new to have three-year recidivism rates and, even then, how could we say that something in another state would work here? But I plugged on. I eventually identified three states that appeared to be doing something different with some promise: Missouri treated kids convicted as adults in the juvenile system; Oregon had a youth authority, which grouped together juveniles of similar age into their mid-20s; and Indiana had a re-entry court. I decided to focus on these three states.

After I had educated myself on the issue and collected statistics, I made a list of experts I wanted to talk to and narrowed down a list of questions I wanted answered. I made sure to include everyone from children's advocates to prosecutors to criminal justice experts to victims. By researching the issue, I was able to target national experts, and I used several experts from the fellowship. Coincidentally, while reporting my project, I saw a television show about juvenile killers, and I identified one source from there. I developed separate lists of questions for each source,

as I did not want all of them speaking to the same thing. I did not need a whole story full of people saying adult prison is bad for juveniles. I started contacting people. For experts that were in Arizona, I made phone calls requesting interviews. I did as many interviews as I could in person. I believe you have better interviews if you take the time to actually sit down with someone. For national experts, I found email addresses on the Internet and sent them an email first. In those emails, I explained my project and why I was contacting the expert, and I requested a phone interview. I included information on when I was available and during what time frame I hoped to reach the person. This allowed these experts to fit me into their busy schedules. More than one of them requested that I call them at a home office on their "day off."

I picked a photographer to work with me before I visited the Minor's Unit at the Arizona State Prison Complex – Tucson for the first time at the end of July. I first told him about the project when we spent a week out of town in July covering a wildfire. Pat Shannahan and I batted around ideas and went together every time we visited the Tucson prison.

The first time we went to Tucson, Pat and I spent a day on the Minor's Unit, observing educational programs and talking to teachers and a psychologist. It took about a week to arrange this visit because the Department of Corrections had a new PIO, who initially didn't even know that the prison system had juveniles. And she wasn't clear on the photography guidelines, so on the first visit, we weren't allowed to photograph kids' faces. After we got back, I researched DOC's written policies on photography: Inmate faces could be photographed if the inmates were not named. That turned out to be good for us. One of my biggest problems was getting access to the kids. In Arizona, media are not allowed to do face-to-face interviews with inmates. All interviews have to be done over the phone, 15 minutes at a time. While I was on the unit, I was able to identify some juveniles I thought I might like to talk to. The warden also explained to us that at midnight on a kid's 18th birthday, he is walked over to the adult side. We decided to be there for one of the crossovers. We identified a teenager turning 18 at the end of August. But he had to sign a waiver before he could be interviewed or photographed. Luckily, he did. All inmates that we interviewed had to sign waivers. If we had a waiver from a kid and encountered him on a subsequent visit to the Minor's Unit, we could photograph him.

I picked my inmate interviews randomly. I had a list of the 96 juveniles, and DOC also provided me with a list of inmates who had been first incarcerated as minors then released and returned to custody for committing new crimes. To represent everyone, I picked based on race, age and type of crime. The interviews ranged from a burglar to a murderer. For recidivists, I wanted

inmates who served their first sentence for non-violent crimes then returned for violent crimes. Vincent Cortez jumped out at me. His first adult conviction was for possessing an inhalant; he came back two months after release for armed robbery. He was a great interview and I immediately knew he would figure near the top of my story. The decision was mostly instinct: the kid fit exactly the point I was trying to make with my story.

Pat and I also spent some time at the Maricopa County jail, where juveniles either awaiting trial as adults or sentenced to less than a year, are housed. We sat in on their educational programs, and Pat went out with the juvenile chain gang. We ended up getting invited to a GED graduation, where one of the speakers was Maricopa County Superior Court Commissioner Chris Wotruba. It turned out that Wotruba presided over a monthly re-entry court for some juveniles convicted as adults. Although the court did not take minors coming out of adult prison, we still attended to see how it was done and if it seemed like something that would be a viable option to help juveniles. At my editor's direction, I had to keep my eyes open for "solutions" and this seemed like it could be one.

Every time I did an interview, I created a take with notes, quotes and impressions. Each interview was a separate take so I could easily find what I was looking for when it came time to write. They all started out with the slug "juvies" followed by a period and the name of the person I had interviewed. I ended up with about 1,400 inches of notes. Early on, I wrote a very sketchy outline of how I envisioned the project. It basically had a nut graph and key questions I planned to answer. As the months passed, I often kicked myself for not creating a more solid outline early on. There was so much information and so many directions to take that it was hard sometimes to maintain that focus. I write in blocks. Each block basically has a beginning, middle and an end. A colleague of mine calls it "curtain up/curtain down." Each block can be picked up as a whole and moved around without affecting the rest of the story.

In August, I began meeting with my editor weekly about the project. We planned a run date for the end of October. Each week, I had to report my progress to him. This kept me on task and ensured that I didn't push my project aside for something else. At the beginning of every week, I made a list of whom I was going to call that week, and I marked off the people as I reached them.

Writing the story was probably the most difficult part of the process. I began at the beginning of October. I wasn't sure yet if I was done reporting, but I figured if I started writing I would see where the holes were. Technically, a reporter could report forever on a single topic, so you have to stop at some

point and assess where you're at. As it turned out, I had done so many interviews, that there really weren't any holes. In fact, I ended up interviewing a lot of folks that I didn't even quote. They greatly enhanced my understanding of the topic, but I had to include only the people who made the points the strongest. It's difficult sometimes to weed people out because I tend to cling to my favorite quotes. But after I started reading, it became apparent which people were saying the same things, and I had to pick between them. When I absolutely couldn't, I would run two sets of quotes by another reporter and ask which one she liked best. I told myself ahead of time that I would respect her judgment instead of second-guessing. This was very helpful.

I initially wrote everything into one story, following my basic outline. I had my lede, which we decided would be hard news instead of anecdotal, followed almost immediately by an anecdote and a quote that drove the point home. Then I listed bullet points that summarized all the points: recidivism, creating new victims, lack of rehabilitation and cost to taxpayers. I then broke the story into sections: the key criticisms of the system; a history of how we got here; a closer look at how juveniles are treated in adult prison; discussions about whether this is the best way to rehabilitate juveniles, based on new brain research; acknowledgements by DOC that the system wasn't working; and possible solutions. I used actual cases and interviews with the juveniles to break up the sections. The first draft was over 150 inches long. It quickly became apparent that some of my reporting just didn't fit the story and some sections bogged it down. We ended up using almost nothing from the county jail simply because we boiled the focus down just to juveniles in adult prison. The section on brain research was pulled out into a sidebar. Several of the juvenile interviews were turned into a sidebar of profiles.

The following weeks involved restructuring and reorganizing the story more than half a dozen times after more editors weighed in with suggestions.

As I was completing the writing process, I met with graphics to get those in the works. By this point, I knew which statistics would best compliment the story without duplicating it. I didn't want the graphics to say exactly what the story did. This was a way for me to include more statistics, including an extensive breakdown from the database I had created, that didn't work into the story. The final story was 102 inches, with an 11-inch sidebar on brain research and 13 inches of profiles. Or so I thought.

The week before we had planned to publish, there was another meeting with higher-up editors who were reading the story for the first time. The focus changed again. Simply put, the editors said, people are not going to care

about the juveniles who are violent. I needed to focus on the juveniles who were sent to prison for non-violent crimes and came out worse. These were the kids the system was failing worst. Their recidivism rates were the highest and they were four times as likely as adults convicted of non-violent crimes to graduate to a violent offense. Any examples I had used of youth convicted for violent crimes were out. That killed my sidebar of profiles and our main photo. And I had a new outline:

1. Outline issue with a hard-news lede that addressed key points (these were bulleted) and foreshadowed possible solutions.
2. Provide context. Describe the change in the law that allowed more juveniles to go to adult prison and the causes and effects of that.
3. Voices of kids and advocates for change. This section would combine all the criticisms of the system, which had previously been spread throughout the story.
4. Solutions. What was already being done in the Arizona system and what was being done elsewhere.
5. Conclusion. This was an anecdote.

With the new outline, I had to choose different kids to include in the story and rework how I was using them. My heart sunk at first, but I have to admit now the story turned out much stronger. It was much more focused and much better organized. When it came to this rewrite, having a solid outline helped immensely to keep me on track.

I got a lot of support from my newsroom to do the story. I made three or four trips to the state prison in Tucson, visited the county jail unit three times and attended re-entry court. I did have to juggle the project with daily stories and other enterprise stories until I got to the writing stage. At that point, I was given a week to do nothing but write the story. This allowed me to fully concentrate on the project. I learned how important it is to follow every lead, even if you don't end up using it. For example, we didn't use anything from the county jail program, but it led us to the re-entry court, which I did use. It's better to have too much information than too little, but you have to be judicious about what you're willing to throw out at the end. Because I had done so much research and so many interviews, I was able to switch my story focus at the last minute without having to do a bunch of new reporting. It became a matter of simply picking different statistics and different quotes. I basically became an expert on my project, having read as many reports and studies as I could find and spending a lot of time in the environment I was writing about. This allowed me to write with authority.

Some writing and/or reporting techniques that might be useful to other journalists:

1. Have your statistics in hand first and make sure you really have a story. Pick your angle but don’t be afraid to change it after you do more reporting.
2. Make sure your editors are invested in the story, too. Pitch the story to them at the beginning and brainstorm with them from the beginning. This will alleviate heartache later if it turns out your editor had a different vision than you. It also should make it easier for you to get the time you need for the project. There are a lot of competing demands in a newsroom and you need an editor who is on board with you if you expect to be pulled off your beat at all to complete the project.
3. Research your topic as much as possible before you start doing interviews. You want to have a solid grasp of your topic before you starting talking to experts about it. Some people will try to steer you in a different direction or try to convince you your hypothesis is wrong. Knowledge of your topic will keep you from being swayed and allow you to defend your hypothesis. Keep in mind that experts are busy people and often don’t want to take the time to educate you. You want to be able to ask intelligent questions and make the most of whatever interview time you can get. Also research the people you’re interviewing. Know their backgrounds and their stances on the issues you are writing about.
4. Take as much time as you can to put yourself in the environment you are writing about. This gives you a better feel for what you are writing about and a better understanding of the circumstances. Also be aware that if you are making time to go into a prison or some sort of similar facility that people will probably be on their best behavior while you are there. Visit several times.
5. Always remain open minded yet skeptical. Officials will try to put a positive spin on things, but they also can have insight that will be useful to you. Criminals DO lie.
6. Follow all your leads. Even if you can’t use everything in the story, each piece will give you a better understanding of the whole. You want to be an authority on what you are writing about.
7. Create an outline and use it. This can help you organize lengthy projects much better than pulling it all out of your head. Be open to making changes when you start writing and realize that certain sections bog things down and might need to be moved around or eliminated. Be willing to let go of your favorite quote. Try writing your sections without opening your notebook. You should be knowledgeable enough on your topic that you can make the points in your own words. Then use your notes to fill in statistics, context, quotes, etc.

8. Write in blocks. Organizing a lengthy feature can be daunting. But it's easier if you use your outline and write each section as if it could stand alone. Each block should have a beginning, middle and an end. Keep discussions about like topics together, as it can be confusing and unfocused to have them popping up at random places in your story. It's much more powerful to have all your critics together, and it's easier for readers to follow your points. Blocks also can be picked up and moved without requiring a full-scale rewrite of your project.
9. Involve photos and graphics from the beginning. Working with one photographer on a project is much easier than working with several. Listen to what your photographer has to say. He can have ideas that make your story stronger.

THE PRODUCT

My story ran as a one-day Sunday centerpiece. I had two inside pages. I was limited to a maximum of 115 inches of copy, including the main story and any sidebars. This was so half of each inside page could be used for photos and graphics. My paper calls these "entry points" and you want several of them to draw in readers. A page that is too gray can be daunting for readers.

The final package included six photos and a front-page graphic. We also ran a slideshow online with photos that didn't make the package. I worked with the photographer to make sure those cutlines also told a story through vignettes and quotes.

THE RESULTS

I saw my first results before my story even ran. About two weeks before my copy deadline, the director of the Arizona Department of Corrections requested another interview with me. When I got there, she outlined a new vocational training program that would start on the Minor's Unit on Jan. 1. It was to be the first vocational program ever on the unit, and it was an indication that the state was taking notice that maybe something did need to be done differently with these juveniles.

The day after the story ran, I received an email from a gentleman who said he planned to form a statewide political action committee to attempt to change mandatory youth sentencing laws. I also received several calls from average citizens praising the story and saying they hoped it would generate awareness of a flawed system. Some folks within the Department of Corrections said the story "caught on to something really big in ADC right

now," the emphasis on redirecting resources to protect the public now AND later.

I wasn't sure what the results would be when I started this project. Unfortunately, in Arizona, people care immensely when horses are abused or dogs are killed, but they express very little outrage when killers get away with murder or children die at the hands of their parents. I wanted our readers to understand that Arizona wasn't locking up these juvenile criminals and throwing away the key. They were coming out of prison very young and, in some cases, worse. Rehabilitation was abysmal and needed to be changed. I didn't expect there would be any push to overturn Proposition 102, which made it easier to send juveniles to adult prison, but I hoped there would be some effort to do more with these juveniles to ensure that when they came out, they wouldn't continue their cycle of crime. And I wanted readers to be aware that states like Missouri were doing things differently with better outcomes. The changes proposed by the Department of Corrections, including job training and anger management support groups, were a step in the right direction.

My approach to this story was not any different than it was for previous projects. However, the Justice and Journalism activities helped me connect with key sources and gave me a better overview of issues surrounding crime and punishment. Too often it seems that when I go to conferences, there doesn't end up being a direct link to my beat, and it can be difficult to take something away that directly impacts my work. This fellowship was different. Everything was geared to stronger justice reporting, and I walked away with not only ideas for the future but also experts I could use now. The fellowship challenged me to look at an issue that I might not have looked at otherwise. And, perhaps most important, it gave me a network of journalists who were working on the same types of stories and were passionate about them. When I was frustrated or struggling, I could reach out to the other fellows for support and advice. On several occasions, I shared ledes of my story and outlines for feedback, and this was incredibly helpful. I certainly value the friendships I made through the fellowship, and I have appreciated the opportunity to be part of a meaningful program that directly affects the job I do every day. I hope, in the end, more newspapers place a higher value on solid justice reporting.