AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY

trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice

No. 46

Boot Camps and Justice: A Contradiction in Terms?

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As I speak to people right across Australia about criminal justice matters, a common response is that "young people today don't have any respect, don't have commitment, have had it too easy, and get a mere slap on the wrist if they commit an offence". What would set things right, it is asserted, would be to subject them to a strict disciplinary regime which ensures that offenders learn to work hard, obey rules, and understand the consequences of their actions. Arguments such as this find their way onto the political agenda, and following the development of boot camps right across the United States, the Government of Western Australia established a work camp in March 1995.

For our social policy to work, it is essential that there be a good understanding of theory and practice, careful planning, and rigorous evaluation of the intended and unintended consequences of policy initiatives. In this Trends and Issues, Lynn Atkinson looks at boot camp regimes in the United States and raises questions for Australian policy makers.

Adam Graycar
Director

In March 1995 a work camp for non-violent offenders aged 16 to 21 years was opened near the remote town of Laverton in Western Australia. Originally conceived as a boot camp, and marketed under a law and order banner during a key by-election in 1994, the work camp has its roots in US military-style correctional boot camps (shock incarceration). These boot camps have spread across the United States since the 1980s as an alternative to conventional prison for young adult offenders.

Although ultimately shying away from the strict military model underlying many United States boot camp programs, the Western Australian work camp, with its emphasis on a highly structured and disciplined regime, raises issues about the models underpinning this response to crime, the appropriateness and effectiveness of such models, and the best use of criminal justice resources.

Boot camps are popular in the USA, where images of offenders performing military-style drill, taking orders, and demonstrating respect for authority, have strong public and media appeal (MacKenzie & Parent 1992). But what do boot camps, or work camps, really offer in the way of solutions to offending by young people? This Trends and Issues looks at the idea behind shock incarceration and explores boot camp goals and regimes to see how well they meet their objectives.

July 1995

ISSN 0817-8542
ISBN 0 642 22942 2

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Shock Incarceration

In the United States, the first shock incarceration statute was passed in Ohio in 1965 (Osborne 1994). The legislation provided backing for the earlier "shock" prototypes: taste-of-prison and "scared straight" types of programs. These kinds of programs have been consistently unsuccessful; however, the popular appeal of shock incarceration has endured. The concept re-manifested in the form of correctional boot camps, the first of which was established in Georgia in 1983.

Boot camps generally offer reduced sentences to eligible offenders in exchange for their participation in a regimen which eschews individualism and promotes inter-dependence, and which demands unquestioning compliance, discipline, hard work, and physical toughness. The programs are intense and unrelenting, and aim to "break down [the inmates'] individualism" as an ex-military superintendent of a prison boot camp once put it, in order to recast the inmate in a disciplined, conformist mould (Hoffman 1990, p. 32).

The Challenge to Change

Boot camp regimes seek to capitalise on the transformative power of stress (shock) to inculcate behavioural and attitudinal change. In general, prisoners experience stress at the start of a period of incarceration. That stress is exacerbated in the structured, authoritarian environment of boot camps. In the early days of boot camp detention uncertainty prevails and previous behavioural responses are found to be inadequate for gaining control of the new situation. It is a watershed time when defences are down and when, it is argued, the conditions for change are optimised.

The Military Model

Across the United States there are over 47 boot camps in state prison systems, two in the federal system, ten in local jails and prisons and about six boot camps for juveniles (MacKenzie 1994). The nature and quality of boot camp programs vary considerably, with military discipline and training providing the common core.

The appropriateness of the military model to the rehabilitation of offenders is questioned by the opponents of boot camps. Some observers are particularly concerned that correctional boot camps appear to be premised on an outmoded military model. Negative strategies are reportedly no longer used with military recruits, yet degradation, harassment and physical punishment are abiding features of modern correctional boot camps.

Mathlas and Mathews (1991, p. 325) explore the concept of offenders as victims, both in their life chances and under the boot camp regime, and assert that a

> *boot camp program which relies on dominance, degradation and demeaning of the prisoners runs counter to basic principles of learning and human behaviour. The person abused is likely to become an abuser, and given the opportunity may well use these tactics upon release to the community.*

Drill instructors, the key operational staff of boot camps, are all powerful and always right. The correctional boot camp model inherently espouses and promotes stereotypically masculinist values and behaviours and "machismo role modelling" by drill instructors, which can lead to abuse of power (Mathlas & Mathews 1991). It is doubtful whether such role models are appropriate for functional, relational living in the 1990s.

At New York State's Butler Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility there is a "Butler way" and a wrong way of doing everything (Waldron (1990). At Butler, as at other boot camps, inmates refer to themselves in the third person? "this inmate"? and ask for permission to speak. Summary justice, often in the form of on-the-spot push-ups, is meted out for minor rule violations, or for appearing to be less than committed to the minutia of the regime. Symbolic punishments can have a particularly concrete manifestation, like lumping around a heavy log for days? a log called a "learning experience" in the euphemistic language of "Shock-speak"? while undertaking training and other tasks. Clearly, there is great scope for abuse of authority in these circumstances, where the power differential is extreme, and where inmates are routinely pushed to the limits of their physical and emotional capabilities.

Military basic training, however the model manifests itself, is intended to produce disciplined and ultimately skilled soldiers. Military recruits undergoing basic training are preparing for a career in the military, and to go to war. They learn unquestioning obedience to authority, and appropriate vocational and technical skills. In a military context they also benefit from a protective mantle to shelter them from the vicissitudes of life. Housing and medical treatment are taken care of throughout a career in the defence forces, and extensive family support services are readily available to military personnel and their families.

But none of this applies to young offenders? either in the US or in Australia. Many of these young people live at the margins, some of them will be substance abusers, and a disproportionate number of them will be members of minority groups. Boot camps provide a model of discipline, physical training and obedience, but there is no career path associated with it, and no attendant social welfare cocoon. Questions about the fundamental emphasis in boot camps on drill and rigour, appear as a running thread through the literature. For example, the Director of Michigan's Centre for the Study of Youth Policy asks:

> *What are these guys going to do for a living?, Push-ups? To think that 90 days of training is going to undo 17 years of family troubles is a terribly naive approach . . . They're kidding themselves. These kids have no education. No job skills. The counselling [in boot camp programs] is no more than a classroom lecture* (New York 1993, p. 6).

Even boot camp insiders acknowledge that it is not possible to "turn someone's life around simply by making them do push-ups, march in formation, or take orders" (New York 1993, p. 12). Nevertheless, these central program components continue to be seen as appropriate tools for teaching respect and teamwork. However, in some boot camps, such as those in New York, education, various forms of counselling, and drug and alcohol treatment are considered to be of equal value. Clearly, the quality and extent of the particular vocational and treatment programs delivered in boot camps and, perhaps more importantly, during the community supervision phase, is central to any assessment of the effectiveness of boot camps.

The New York Program

The New York State Department of Correctional Services boot camp program is the largest in the US, providing over 1500 shock incarceration places. Since the incarceration phase of the program lasts six months, the scheme can accommodate two intakes per year (Clark et al. 1994). Programs operate in four locations, none of which is within a regular prison complex. This less typical boot camp arrangement (the majority of boot camps are located at conventional prisons) means that facilities can be custom made and located to suit program and security requirements.

The New York program does not accept recruits who are escape risks, and it rejects violent offenders and sex offenders. Only offenders aged between 16 and 34, committed to prison for the first time on an indeterminate sentence and eligible for parole within three years, may participate. Eligible prisoners are recommended to boot camp by the Department of Correctional Services rather than the court. The boot camp option applies, therefore, only to sentenced prisoners, rather than to offenders serving a community-based sentence. Women are eligible for one of the boot camp programs in New York.

Participation in the New York program is voluntary. Nearly one-third of New York boot camp inmates fail to complete the program. Inmates may drop out of the program voluntarily (or be expelled), in which case the original (longer) prison sentence applies. Two women expelled from a New York camp for fighting, thirteen days before graduation, were returned to prison, with no account taken of the time they had spent in the boot camp program (Hoffman 1990). Adjustments in screening procedures and program requirements are made from time to time to maximise the number of volunteers to the program and minimise drop-outs.

Apart from intensive physical training, inmates are required to participate in therapeutic and educational programs, and to engage in hard manual labour for many hours each day. At the end of the six-month incarceration phase? a longer period than in most boot camps? there is an intensive community supervision phase.

The New York program has undergone an extensive semi-experimental evaluation. It claims to meet its legislative mandate of "treating and releasing specially selected state prisoners earlier than their court determined minimum period of incarceration, without compromising the community protection rights of the citizenry" (New York 1993, Executive Summary). Key features of the New York program are its size, its duration, its intensive community supervision phase, and, importantly, selection procedures which ensure the boot camp option is always an alternative to a prison sentence. The importance of these features becomes clear as the fit between goals and outcomes is explored below.

Boot Camp Objectives

Reducing recidivism through inducing law abiding, conforming behaviour is one goal of shock incarceration programs. Many modern boot camps also aim to reduce prison costs and relieve prison overcrowding.

Parent (1993; 1994) claims it is possible to achieve some or all of these things, but only under limited and specific conditions which are rarely met. In fact, boot camps typically do not reduce recidivism, and rather than decrease prison populations, overcrowding and costs, they are more likely to increase them.

Rehabilitation and Recidivism

Research into inmate perceptions of a boot camp program in Louisiana found that compared with inmates in traditional prisons, boot camp graduates were "more positive about their prison experience, about their ability to make positive changes in their lives, and in general prosocial attitudes" (MacKenzie & Shaw 1990, p. 125). Inmates also found it an advantage that they "learned to get up in the mornings and be active" (MacKenzie & Parent 1992, p. 114). A study from Texas found that boot camp inmates thought their experience was better than prison, and that it could curb future criminality (Burton et al. 1993). These inmates reported more faith in future opportunities, and they demonstrated an improvement over their time in the program in self-control and coping skills.

Shock inmates who complete the program leave feeling more positive

than regular prisoners do about their experience (MacKenzie & Shaw 1990). Does this optimism and improved self-concept translate to a satisfying and law abiding lifestyle? Can it survive the young offender's return to the street, the peer group, the neighbourhood, the combination of social and economic circumstances which form the backdrop to a young person's ability and/or inclination to live within the law? Indeed, do the lessons of boot camps, and the role modelling, have currency in the world outside? What sort of currency, if they do?

Long-term evaluations have been carried out in some boot camp programs to test whether boot camps have an impact on repeat offending. Early reports indicated boot camp graduates might have lower rates of repeat offending than ex-prisoners. However, later studies have shown that over time the differences between the two groups of releasees diminish and largely disappear (Bowery 1991; Parent 1994; MacKenzie 1994). Boot camp evaluations offer no evidence to indicate that future criminal behaviour is reduced through this type of intervention. An evaluation of the program in Georgia, whose regime at the time emphasised military aspects and contained little in the way of therapeutic programming, actually showed higher recidivism rates for boot camp graduates than for the control groups (MacKenzie 1994). (The Georgia program has since undergone major changes.)

Costs

A relatively high level of supervision, treatment and training applies at boot camps compared with regular prisons. Cost savings can therefore only occur providing capital costs are contained and the programs operate at or near full capacity, thereby avoiding a substantial number of significantly longer prison sentences. One way to ensure this is to have correctional authorities select boot camp volunteers from a pool of eligible prisoners. If referrals are by way of the courts or probationary authorities instead, offenders who otherwise would not have been detention bound will be caught in the net.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding in the prison system can only be relieved if there is no net-widening associated with recruitment to boot camps, if confinement in boot camps is for a significantly shorter period than inmates' original sentences, and if the numbers of recruits who complete a boot camp program are sufficient to make a real impact on prison numbers. Even when other criteria are satisfied, boot camps, with their small client numbers, have a very limited capacity to reduce prison overcrowding.

Boot Camps for Juveniles

The impact of the boot camp environment takes on added potency where juveniles are concerned. Taylor (1992, p. 124) points out that juveniles

> *can become alienated, withdrawn, delinquent, rebellious and explosive when their needs for significance and power are unmet or frustrated.*

In particular,

> *[a]djudicated juveniles usually resist authority and refuse to listen or learn in traditional classroom or treatment environments.*

These effects are even more evident for young people from oppressed, disadvantaged minority groups. In Australia, the colonial education system, experienced by many Aboriginal people as violent, oppressive and disconnected from their needs and cultures, has failed generations of Aboriginal young people. These youth have voted with their feet and abandoned mainstream classrooms, often before entering high school. Aboriginal youth in the juvenile justice system are invariably under-educated and wounded by their school experiences. In Australian State and Territory jurisdictions, the gross over-representation of Aboriginal juveniles in detention, and the growing over-representation of other minority groups such as the Indo-Chinese (Cain 1994), make these groups prime candidates for punitive juvenile justice system innovations, such as boot camps (or work camps).

Arguably, boot camps by definition deploy inappropriate learning contexts and teaching methods for their young clientele. Fear, coercion and the imposition of a fixed set of values supporting, among other things, authoritarianism and rigid conformity are seldom ameliorative for minority groups and damaged or disad-vantaged young people.

The shock experience is a major platform and educative tool of boot camps. Polsky and Fast (1993) describe the shock ritual on the first day in a pilot boot camp in the US for juveniles? the ritual which, according to the theory, produces the first and major optimum learning phase. The ritual begins with the shackling and herding of inmates out of transport vehicles. This is followed by "devastating" streams of verbal abuse and "unceasing" bullying. The process ends with the total loss of the individual's "locus of control" (Polsky & Fast 1993, p. 408).

Polsky and Fast maintain, along with unnamed "authorities", that such a ritual is "essential to shock incarceration" (1993, p. 408), but fail to explain how the ritual is educationally valuable, and whether adapting to the regime in response to the shock rituals is other than a short-term survival technique. They recommend repeating the high stress phase, with an eye to promoting a second optimum learning phase, at a later point in the program.

In a critique of Polsky and Fast, James (1993) argues against the legitimacy of shock regimes, especially for children, and asks a series of vital questions which

evaluation research has so far left unanswered. What negative long-term effects of boot camp regimes might there be on the offender? Even if short-term outcomes seem positive, does the end justify the means? Are there equally effective, more humane alternatives? How salutary is the role modelling which incorporates control of others through emotional and verbal abuse? James points to some positive add-on elements of boot camps (counselling, vocational training and the potential for positive adult role modelling and support), but makes it clear that these components can operate independently of the boot camp environment, and may be more effective without it. As a prison programs expert puts it: "The rehabilitation part sounds right, but what purpose does the boot camp itself serve?" (Bloom, quoted in Hoffman 1990, p. 36).

Taylor (1992) proposes a revision of the boot camp idea to benefit juvenile offenders. In redesigning corrections programs to suit juveniles, he clearly seeks to underpin his blueprint with the adventure challenge concept. Experiential learning lies at the core of such programs.

This would involve a focus on "concrete feelings and self-concept" with counselling in an "experiential context" where daily activities are real and meaningful. Discipline in such a model would be part of a meaningful structure which allows the young clients to develop and feel some control over their lives. Young people would be encouraged to identify their strengths, test and develop them in an experiential context. Comprehensive programming would provide educational and vocational training, problem solving practice and techniques, and enable the young people themselves to engage in "value clarification", rather than having a rigid set of values and behaviours imposed upon them. Taylor points out that juveniles need to draw their own conclusions from active participation in the program, rather than having this done for them, and this can only be achieved after a reasonable length of time in the program.

If positive effects are to be long term, intensive community support and supervision after the residential phase are essential. James (1993) concurs, but opts for early intervention and community-based programs in preference to residential programs. Intervention programs, urges James (1993, p. 418),

must include the family, the schools, and the community to ensure that long lasting change can be achieved. Only when young offenders can be treated in their home environments can they have a reasonable chance of maintaining some of their newly learned skills.

The Efficacy of Boot Camps

As part of a current law and order initiative, US-style shock incarceration is reportedly being considered by the British Home Secretary. In response, the General Secretary of the Association of Chief Probation Officers claimed to be "mystified" that anyone could contemplate introducing practices "used by a country [the US] with the highest crime rates in the Western world" (Travis 1994, p. 2). Given the track record of the US in containing crime; given the trend in US evaluations of boot camps that they "do not reduce recidivism, do not reduce prison populations, and, overall, do not reduce costs" (Parent 1993, p. 1); given the comprehensive concerns about the lessons inherent in the military model; and, given the lack of information about the long-term effects of boot camps on individuals and families, the model's attraction at home and abroad seems to lie more in its perceived public appeal, than in measurable effectiveness.

Boot camps have a currency in the US despite the evidence and concerns of the critics. A number of researchers doubt the efficacy of the military framework of boot camps, but many seem to accept it as a given. They opt for salvaging positive components of boot camp programs and revamping others, while minimising the intrusion of the military context. Policy recommendations to minimise the damage and maximise any positive outcomes of boot camps include the following:

- defining goals and specifying the client group;
- structuring the length and nature of the program, including aftercare, in accordance with those goals;
- having the referring authority independent of the courts to stem net-widening;
- selecting staff appropriate to the clientele and their needs, in terms of race, gender, and specialist knowledge;
- ensuring adequate staff numbers and their careful training and monitoring to minimise abuse;
- protecting the health and welfare of inmates and staff, and the liability of staff and the state, with appropriate legislation and/or regulations;
- considering boot camps within a broader framework of equal opportunity; and
- a commitment to evaluation.

Conclusion

Australian young offenders need properly resourced programs which increase their educational and vocational skills and improve their employment prospects; which teach problem solving, anger management and relationship expertise and enhance self-esteem; which safeguard or improve their physical and mental health; and which provide appropriate levels of support in the community. But the boot camp context is inappropriate and arguably alien to Australian history and cultures. Boot

camp populations will inevitably include disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and other minority youth, since over-representation of these groups increases with their greater penetration into the criminal justice system. Heavy-handed control and standover tactics have not worked with Aboriginal people? nor are they likely to with most young people. Policy makers should beware revisiting them.

Boot camps have not taken firm root in Australia. They do not have the public profile, or relentless momentum of the US example. In seeking better outcomes for young offenders, governments should resist any temptation to channel much needed resources through the medium of boot camps.

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