

Juvenile Hall: Powder Keg of Rage, Racism

Youths Subjected to Sexual Degradation, Beatings and Rat-Pack Struggle to Survive

BY MIKE GOODMAN

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Central Juvenile Hall. The county's sometime home—the nation's largest—for 500 to 600 boys and girls ranging in age from 10 to 18 and in trouble.

It is a sprawl of newer and not-so-new buildings, ranging from administrative offices equipped with air conditioning to decaying dormitories of locked sleeping quarters that lack even plumbing.

Those stains on the outer walls, visible at some distance, are urine.

Behind its cage-like entrance and heavily screened windows, curfew violators, runaways and hubcap thieves are thrown in with muggers, attempted-murder suspects, sexual psychopaths, dope addicts and psychotics deemed too dangerous even for mental institutions.

They are black, brown, red, yellow and white. They are well-heeled suburban surfers and poor ghetto gang leaders. They are guilty, and—sometimes—they are innocent.

But at Central Juvenile Hall, they are all reduced to a common denominator—a very low one—and subjected to sexual degradation, savage racism and a rat-pack struggle to get through it.

This account of conditions at the hall located near County-USC Medical Center was compiled from legislative testimony, hall statistics, interviews with hall counselors, hall management, county probation sources and state officials, and in first-hand accounts by youngsters. Because most of the interviews were secured without official approval, the sources must remain unnamed.

The findings were also borne out by an unsupervised, and unauthorized, inspection of the hall by a Times reporter.

William Scully, a regional super-

visor for the California Youth Authority, says of Los Angeles County Central Juvenile Hall: "To think that in 1974 there is a place like this . . . I'd hate to have one of my children in there. I would have real fear for his safety."

Adds John Shea, a hall counselor and supervisor for 14 years: "They can call it juvenile hall, but the way things are now it's really a hellhole, and just about anybody's kid can end up there."

Six white youths from 14 to 17 told of being beaten or sexually molested by black gang members, the dominant group inside the 63-year-old institution.

"If you're white you don't stand a chance," said one. "I don't ever remember one of us little white dudes not getting beaten up."

Allen F. Breed, state youth authority director, said the racial polarization is part of a growing resolve among street-hardened blacks "to pay back white society for a whole history of slavery and oppression."

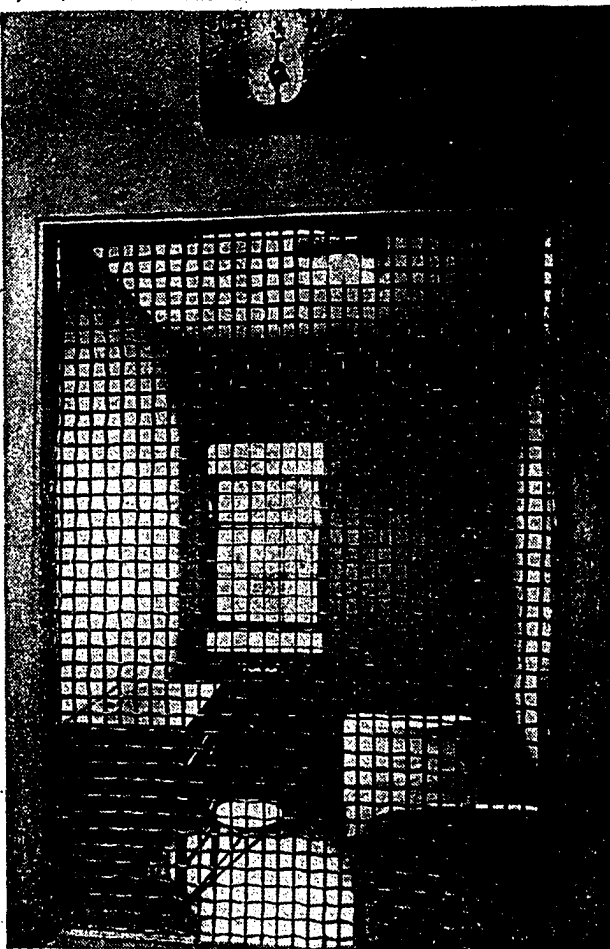
And eight youths from both suburb and ghetto, describing work in the main kitchen and six serving pantries, said it is not unusual for boys to spit and urinate in the food. Three said they personally had defiled milk and bowls of salad—out of hatred for the hall, or another ethnic group, or a rival gang.

"I did it because I knew other guys were doing it to me," said a 16-year-old Los Angeles youth.

Administrator Jeanne Sides—who candidly agreed with the direction of most of The Times' findings but also doubted the severity of them—was most dubious about the defilement of food.

She said she has heard of it in other institutions, but said, "It couldn't

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SLEEPING QUARTERS — Cell-like room is one of 362 in Juvenile Hall where inmates are locked alone at night for 10 hours or so. Other inmates sleep in dorms. Many rooms have no plumbing but some former inmates call them a refuge from gang harassment. Times photo by Don Cormier

JUVENILE HALL: POWDER KEG OF RAGE AND RACISM

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happen here because they don't have the opportunity. Those kids can tell wild stories to anybody who will listen."

Many staff members, however, refuse to eat the food at the hall.

Mrs. Sides pointed out that hall inmates often are members of warring ghetto gangs that have vowed to attack each other on sight, but that since she became administrator in 1970 the hall has not had a "major outbreak" of violence.

"We must be doing *something* right," she said, with little knocks on her wooden desk for good luck.

But several juvenile system officials nonetheless say they consider the hall a powder keg.

Superior Judge William H. Levitt said in a ruling last week, after his own inspection of county juvenile facilities, that "overcrowding at Central Juvenile Hall and Los Padrones (in Downey) has been critical, requiring many minors to sleep on the floor, resulting in unhealthy conditions, homosexual attacks, fire hazards" and other security problems.

The girls are separated from the boys and live in generally better facilities.

Breed attributes the hall's conditions chiefly to an "apathetic Board of Supervisors and a generally apathetic public."

Mrs. Sides blames the problems mainly on substandard facilities, severe overcrowding and a high turnover of personnel—sometimes as high as 40% in recent years.

That turnover, she said, can thrust an inexperienced counselor—they are unarmed—into potentially explosive scenes in trying to control groups of highly sophisticated, street-wise young criminals in already overcrowded conditions.

The average stay in the hall is about two weeks, but sometimes youngsters are confined for several months because no institution or home will accept them, officials said.

A probation officer cited the case of one 16-year-old Los Angeles youth with severe mental problems, whom the state mental hospital at Camarillo refuses to accept.

"He's been there three times and they can't handle his violent ways," he said, adding that the boy has always been returned to juvenile hall, where for months at a time he mingles with first-time offenders and younger boys.

Hall officials say this boy's case is not uncommon. "I've seen young-

sters leave for mental institutions in the morning and be brought back that night because they couldn't be handled," Mrs. Sides said.

Such situations pile up on the hall. It has 549 beds—Illinois' Cook County follows with 530—but the daily population often has shot past 600 in recent months, sometimes leaving as many as 200 youngsters sleeping on mattresses on the floor.

And at night, for the youngsters, the choices are grim.

Those assigned to dormitory units are prey to sexual assault. Eight former inmates told how their attackers would have a glib associate divert an inexperienced counselor while the rest forced a "mark" into one of the sleeping rooms.

Using a sheet or blanket draped over a cot as camouflage, the youths then force their victim under the cot and quickly rape him. Closets and dark bathrooms are also used.

Says John Garfield, president of the county probation officers' union, "There's great prestige among the hard-core kids in sexually intimidating the less aggressive youngsters, and that includes oral copulation and sodomy. I've broken up some of these sex jobs myself."

Many of those not in dorm units at night are locked alone in tiny cell-like rooms for 10 hours or more. Some former inmates regard the cells as a relief from the harassment and sexual attacks of the gangs.

But many of the hall's 362 single rooms, bare except for a metal desk and cot, lack any plumbing at all. Many of these rooms reek of sweat and urine, particularly in the 100-degree summer weather.

More fastidious inmates have for years relieved themselves through the heavily screened windows, thus staining the outside walls. Said one, "You bang and bang on the door, but a lot of times they (the night staff) don't come so you gotta go out the window, or under the door."

The hall currently processes 2,000 youngsters a month from Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, San Fernando Valley, San Gabriel Valley and any other of the county's 50 police jurisdictions.

Mrs. Sides says if the offense is minor, such as a curfew violation, it is up to the arresting officer to decide whether his charge should go to the hall or to the police station to await his parents.

If parents cannot be found, or will not come, police have no alternative.

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And if the offense is more serious, more often than not the youngster goes directly to the hall.

Mrs. Sides says every effort is made to separate first-time and minor offenders from the hard cases, but admits that "success is not 100%."

Juvenile Judge David Kenyon testified before an Assembly committee last month that mixing of novices and hardened criminals happens "all the time"—mainly because of overcrowding.

The explosiveness of the mixture—hardened ghetto gangs against naive, unorganized suburban youths, the physically weak or the mentally or emotionally disturbed—is vividly described by counselors, and by the youngsters themselves.

One group of black youths told The Times they tormented "the white boys" to vent their frustrations against a white society that they blame for their troubles. Five termed the hall "Disneyland" and said it was a place to have "fun and play with the white dudes' heads." "White boy is used to having his way on the 'outs' (outside), but inside the brothers run things," said a 17-year-old South Los Angeles youth who was in for attempted murder and possession of firearms.

Said another, "The white and their pig protectors and their rich fathers think they are superior in the streets, but there's no pigs or rich fathers in the halls, jails and camps."

"We make them remember what they've done to us for 200 years," said another.

And still another, 17, who bragged, "We're as good as the whites, but they keep ripping us off and keeping us down. If it was up to me, I'd shoot all the white dudes."

Adults working with these particular black youths said most of them are from families so poverty-stricken, and usually fatherless, that they view their lives with hopelessness and desperation.

And when they get into the hall, Breed said, "For the first time these black youngsters are truly in power roles and their hatred bubbles over. They have been told they're in there because they're poor, black and oppressed, and their crimes were not crimes but acts to demonstrate the whole class struggle.

"Suddenly, for the first time, they see identity and self-worth. Then they feel it's perfectly all right in a juvenile hall setting for them to brutally beat and sexually molest white youngsters."

Hall officials say that most sexual intimidation never gets beyond the talk stage, if caught in time.

One Santa Monica boy, 15, taken in last year on a glue-sniffing charge, recalled his first few days inside as a "pressure target."

"A big black dude came over and squeezed my ass and said, 'Hi honey, you're

going to be my girl tonight.'"

The terrified youth told a counselor, but his pursuer, with several buddies as witnesses, denied all. The counselor did nothing.

Then, said the boy, the gang singled him out for special treatment.

At every opportunity they squeezed and pinched his buttocks and testes or jabbed him in the kidneys with combs and sharpened toothbrushes.

If he tried to sit in the day room, they claimed the chair. At meals, they sat on either side of him and kicked him under the table.

He was followed into the bathroom and punched, kicked and urinated upon. In the shower, they snatched his towel and snapped it at his testes until he fled or screamed for help.

After two days of this, the boy said, he began vomiting and suffering severe headaches.

Finally a street-wise veteran inmate advised him to "play crazy" by faking hysterics and threatening suicide.

It worked. He was sent to a psychiatric ward, where homosexuals and other obvious pressure targets are often sent for their own safety.

Other youths told The Times similar stories, while physically tougher ones told how they avoided molestation by fighting back. A husky 17-year-old from Pasadena said, "The first time one of those dudes made a move on me, I fired on him fast and hard. They left me alone after that."

A high percentage of inmates are Chicanos, but veteran counselor Shea, who has led an employe union fight for better conditions, says Chicanos are rarely targeted by other ethnic groups because they stick together in tight, mutually protective units.

"The paddies (whites) and bloods (blacks) know if they mess with me they got to fight my home boys, too," said one East Los Angeles Chicano who was in for possession of marijuana and a knife.

But warring Chicano street gangs will carry on their bitter outside feuds within the hall, counselors said.

"We just try to keep the kids from killing each other," said one counselor.

The same counselor said that while most of the 270 counselors are dedicated to their work, too many are incompetent, afraid of the boys or just "killing time" waiting for transfer to less dangerous jobs.

"You're sitting on a powder keg for eight hours and nobody seems to care. After a while, you don't care anymore and just try to survive the shift," one counselor said.

"If you can survive that place, you can survive anywhere," another said.

Juvenile halls serve as training grounds for many rookie Probation Department officers who have no intention of staying in the halls after their 18 months

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JUVENILE HALL

Continued from 26th Page of "boot camp" are over, officials concede.

"At least most of the staff who stay on are nonsense, tough, rugged characters who deal fairly with people," Garfield said. "It's the ones who don't care that can cause disasters."

The Times learned that many new counselors are sent to the halls with no formal training and find themselves faced with what are described as "the most vicious punks in the book."

Jerry W. Cooks, supervisor of counselor training, said all are supposed to get an intensive three-week course before assignment, but because of overcrowding and high staff turnover, recruits often must fill jobs on a crash basis and it may be weeks before they are pulled back for training.

"A lot of good people get chewed up in the snake-pit," said a field officer supervisor in the Probation Department. "It takes those kids about five seconds to size up a new counselor. If he's got one weak spot, they'll rip him apart."

Garfield said some counselors, intimidated, look the other way when trouble is brewing. Several youngsters said they have seen counselors try to pacify especially tough inmates with cigarets and special favors.

Smoking is illegal for all, regardless of age, but tobacco and other contraband are common. "Catholic services are the kids' favorite because they are given miniature Bibles. The thin pages are prized for rolling cigarets," one counselor said.

Other contraband, sometimes marijuana, often is tossed over the walls or smuggled inside via parents or relatives. Said one probation officer, "Security is like a sieve in that place."

Earlier this year a young girl went through the entire admission procedure, including changing her clothes and being searched, concealing a .38-caliber pistol in one sock. It was found only when she began firing it at the door of her room.

Mrs. Sides later termed the incident a "security breakdown that was quickly remedied" by some personnel changes.

The California Youth Authority has ordered county officials to end the hall's overcrowding by June 9 or face possible legal action to have it declared unfit.

The county has been reopening former alcoholic rehabilitation centers and forestry camps on a meeting of the deadline.

The Board of Supervisors also has launched a publicity campaign to crash basis in hopes of show what they are doing to improve the juvenile justice system—such as plans to rebuild some of the substandard buildings starting in 1975.

But several hall officials and counselors remain skeptical of the promises.

Garfield said, "The supervisors have made a lot of promises, but that is what we always get—promises." Some hall management personnel agreed with Garfield, but asked not to be identified.

But even such critics as Garfield say that administrators like Mrs. Sides "are doing the best they can with they have."

They point to continuing bureaucratic delays in rebuilding the earthquake-damaged, 411-bed Sylmar Juvenile Hall as an example of official indifference toward treatment of juveniles.

The Sylmar hall was 80% destroyed in February, 1971, but as Police Chief Edward M. Davis testified to the Assembly last month, "Not one stone has been turned to build a new one . . . Most countries treat their prisoners of war better than we treat juveniles."

County officials explain that the delay has been caused by waiting for guarantees of federal disaster funds and for finding an earthquake proof site—but now predict it will be rebuilt on the same site by 1978.

A legislative aide investigating the juvenile justice system in preparation for Assembly committee hearings last month, found a heartwarming admonition in published state guidelines:

"Juvenile halls should be as much like home as possible."

Asked how the reality matched up to the dream, the aide asked, "What is hell like?"