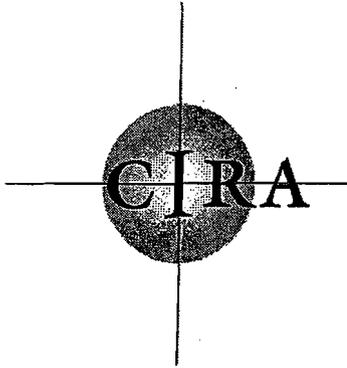


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Sixteen Year Old Adults: The Experiences of CT Teenagers in Adult Prison

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TONY

Tony was arrested in 1996 at the age of 15. During pre-sentence, he was housed in an adult facility. After being sentenced, he was sent to Manson Youth Institution (MYI) for two and a half years.

Tony's mother has been struggling with addiction all of his life. Throughout his youth, she was often using intensely or incarcerated. His father has a long history of incarceration, ending up, in 1992, with an 80 year sentence for murder. In the absence of their parents, Tony and his brother had to fend for themselves.

I: When you were growing up with your brother and your mom at home, did your mom go to—ever go to jail during that time period?

P: Yeah, she did.

I: And then who would you stay with when she was in jail?

P: [My brother] was already in one of those placements so he was basically a ward under the state. Me, I was still home going to school, doing what I had to do, just doing this and doing that. So, when she went to jail, you know what I'm saying, my aunt, she took care of me. She lived right around the corner from me and my cousins and my older cousins who were older than me who were staying with my mother, they helped take care of me. So, and then again, I was taking care of myself 'cause...

I: So, you were living on your own but you were having support from your aunt and your cousins and stuff... And you were 14 or 13...

P: Yeah, yeah, like 13, 14, 15. All—it's like 13, 14, 15 is like—those ages, those ages right there, it's like, I grew up faster than some kids. Some kids my age. While they was like worrying about video games and Barbie dolls and things like that, I was worrying about, you know what I'm saying, how's, you know what I'm saying, how I was going to get to school or if I'm going to have something to eat today.

Born with a (correctable) disability, Tony was the subject of ridicule and harassment by his peers. When he fought back against this bullying, he was kicked out of school. In his mind, this is when his criminal behavior intensified.

P: It was during the summer time so I just basically—basically I got kicked out of one school then I was going to another because my mother had moved out the area that we lived in so you know, I was still going to that school but the principal said I was a menace to the school. I wasn't really a menace. It was like just all my life... I was picked on and teased and I [was] always the butt of somebody's jokes, the center of somebody's jokes. Personally, that is a part of my life where I despise and hate for the fact that—I hated the fact that kids were so cruel that they will take a disability that somebody has and use it to build they self up. So, therefore, all through school and things like that, I would be—they would call me the bully bullier. I would bully the bullies. Little as I was, I would bully the bullies. I would hate to come to school, go to school and see dude bigger—see a bigger dude picking on somebody, trying to take their lunch money or just trying to intimidate them. Me, I may have got my butt whooped but I always was—I was always that person to step in. Like, yo, leave him alone. You want to push somebody, push me.... And [the school principal] look at me like look, just—it's a pattern with you. Why is that? It's like look, I feel that you're an endangerment to the children in the school. You must go somewhere else. I'm not expelling you but you are going somewhere else. So, it's like granted and at that point in time, that's when I really got started—like really getting into more and more and more trouble. And that's when I went to jail. I never—I never got my diploma. That's why I'm in school now.

He felt like a caged dog, angry and apathetic. A sense of abandonment by both the society and his family and friends is clear: no one came to visit him. The experience seemed to have had little rehabilitative effect. By his own admission, when he was released he was “still a knucklehead.”

While the criminal justice system may have treated him like a hardened criminal, Tony expresses a sense of loss for a “normal” youth that he was never able to experience. At the same time, he indicates that now, at age 25, he has a greater ability to reason and consider the consequences of his actions.

P: No, my life—see, to me, I think my life has been affected in most ways positives, in some ways, negative, 'cause I never went to no school proms, you know what I mean, I didn't go through the little, you know, saying, probably been on the debate team or I was a good football player, know what I'm saying. I never really got to do the sports I wanted to go through, things like that. But like I said, it helps me in positive ways because it helps me think that and it helps me think that if, know what I mean, if I wanted to really, really, really do something, or if I really want to like, if I really want to get my—if I don't—if I really care about my freedom, I won't go do that, you know what I mean. It helps me think about it because back then, I would think first, ask questions later, know what I mean. I would jump without saying how high.

ROBERT

Robert was arrested for the first time in 1998, at age 16, and charged as an adult. At the time, he was in 11th grade at Wilbur Cross High School. He served nine months in the New Haven jail, pre-sentence. Eventually a deal was struck where he was sentenced for time served and released. Here he describes his nine-month stay in the New Haven jail (also referred to as “Whalley Ave”).

I: When you went to jail.. in those nine months...did you go to school or anything during that time?

P: Uh, nah, not really. It was- well I went to school, but I didn't get my GED there, I just went to school sometimes, and sometimes I didn't even go. It was like my first time being in jail, so I wasn't really into the school thing, I was just trying to figure out how to get up out of there.

I: Yeah. And did you know anyone in jail?

P: Yeah, there was a lot of kids my age that was there.

I: So did your mom used to come visit you and stuff?

P: Yeah. A lot.

I: And who else came to visit you?

P: My mother and my sister. And my sister's, that was basically it.

I: Did you have any girlfriend at the time, or any friends that were visiting you?

P: Yeah, but, uh, my girlfriend, she was 16, and I think you have to be 18 unless you're with your parents, to come visit.

I: Hmm. But she was too young to come visit you.

P: Yeah.

I: But what about other, other friends, other?

P: Ah, nah, they was too young. They was kids my age, and a bunch of them was in there with me, so.

I: And would you say your mom- how often would you say your mom visited you?

P: Maybe like three, four times a week?

P: Yeah, I was 19. And they still sent me. You could be there up 'til 21... The prison for Manson Youth is 23 hours. 'Cause there's a lot of bunch of younger guys from different parts of the state, and, just gets real wild sometimes.

I: What do you mean it's 23 hours?

P: You're in the cell 23 hours a day.

I: Oh, so it's not a dorm situation? So you're in a cell with one other person?

P: Yeah.

I: You're in the cell 23 hours a day, and you get out for one hour? To do what?

P: To shower, use the phone, play cards.

I: ...Are you suggesting that the reason why it was 23 hours is because its young people that, who they can't control...

P: Yeah....Probably, youngsters is people they can't control. And there's a lotta violence there. There's like kids there for murder...For like, murder and robberies, and assaults...

I: So how did you experience that...

P: Well I was angry, yeah, because they had me in a cell all day, and that, that sucks right there.

I: So what did you used to do with your time?

P: Uh, watch TV. I read a lot of books. Talk to my cell mate. Basically there's not really much to do.

I: Did they have you doing any programs, or courses, or drug treatment programs?

P: They had church, uh, they had a few like NA meetings you would go to but, you would go just to see other guys from our town just sit there and chat and stuff like that. We never really paid attention to what was going on.

I: Did that count as the one hour, or that was like beyond?

P: Yeah.

I: So that was a way to get extra time outside the...

P: Yeah.

SHAWN

Shawn's first incarceration in 1996 at age 15 was the beginning of a long string of sentences. From the age of 15 until 24 he was continuously in prison – serving three sentences and coming out for periods of only one to six months before being re-arrested and re-incarcerated. These consecutive sentences suggest that the punitive approach was not having a rehabilitative impact. When asked to reflect on his experiences with the criminal justice system, Shawn offered the following:

I: Do you think your [your family influenced your] past experiences with the criminal justice system?

P: Yeah, my whole—not my whole family but it's just like where I'm from. It's crazy around there.

I: What do you mean by that?

P: They just built a new police force—police station right there so ever since I've been growing up, I've been getting in trouble, being with the wrong crowd, you know. I've been getting arrested at juvenile placements, Long Lane, stuff like that. Then it just got more serious crimes and stuff. And I end up going to the big house and it's been crazy like. They got a—they want to lock youth up. It stem from back in the 80's when I grew up in First St. Projects, ... the high risers, then like the cops couldn't even come over there really, it was so crazy over there so. It's just like the island you know.

In February 2003, five days after his release from prison, he took a bus to New Haven to get away from Florida and be reunited with extended family. He had virtually no job skills so was unable to find work and did not access any social services or support. He was homeless. He began selling drugs and was re-arrested in November 2003. He served 18 months and was paroled to a halfway house. Juan's incarceration experience is an extreme example of how the criminal justice system can fail troubled youth.

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