An Attempt to Change Disproportionate Minority Contact by Working in Youth Corrections

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Editor’s Introduction: Professor Durán was a youth worker at a private residential treatment facility and a youth security officer at a state juvenile correctional facility. Like most correctional environments, both places held a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minorities. Durán approached youth work with a sense of social justice. Employing a sociological imagination, he places his experiences in the context of societal-level inequality, including his descriptive analysis of instances of staff discrimination against minority youth.

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In this chapter, I explain my experiences as a Chicano and having the opportunity to work within the criminal justice system while pursuing advanced degrees devoted toward the study of crime. My goal was to find solutions for crime in my neighborhood and explore why my family and friends were seen as part of the problem. This pursuit led me to comprehend larger societal issues of race and ethnicity, specifically disproportionate minority contact (DMC). DMC is an area of inequality studies that focuses on racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system (Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002). DMC research involves the collection of juvenile justice data to determine whether youth of color (blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans) are more likely than white youth to be arrested, placed on probation, and sent to secure confinement. Working within the criminal justice system gave me the opportunity to see the lived reality of higher numbers of blacks and Latinos experiencing differential treatment. My education gave me the knowledge and research tools to explain why this was occurring and how inequality could be corrected. Criminal justice employment offered me mainstream legitimacy. Growing up, I often felt targeted for misbehavior, and now I was enforcing the law.

Working within the criminal justice system exposed me to the unethical behavior of a small number of staff members who remained protected by a code of silence: a term used to describe the withholding of vital information to demonstrate loyalty and to protect the group to which an individual belongs (Maas, 1973). In the realm of criminal justice, the unwritten employee perspective was that humans make mistakes; therefore, staff should support one another. Such a belief system and code of conduct led to many problems that I’d like to explore in this essay. I hope my story can help others see the importance of working within the criminal justice system for “hands-on” knowledge, to encourage advanced education teachers to make sense of these experiences, and finally the combination of the two in order to

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that he witnessed. As he found out, working toward social change from within a social system like corrections is very difficult. Durán points out, however, that correctional employees can make a difference by refusing to tolerate racism and discrimination.
create a better system for changing behaviors and improving the lives of our future leaders.

Having grown up in a working class social environment, I was interested in providing protection for my family and friends. Physical confrontations were a possibility, and thus, accomplishing the goal of legal protection was a challenge for many residents. The racial, economic, ethnic, and religious prejudices of residents within the state of Utah resulted in differential opportunities and treatment for individuals who did not fit the white, blond, blue-eyed, and Mormon profile of the majority group. When I was a teenager, the groups providing protection were occasionally involved in gangs, and this only enhanced opposition by criminal justice agencies who perceived the entire community as criminal. This stereotype was defined as “ecological contamination” by Werthman and Piliavin (1967). These researchers argued that people living within a community were often treated as possessing the same attributes as the small number of individuals who were criminally involved (see Rodriguez, 1997, for more on this topic). I wanted to change the differential treatment by the criminal justice system and work to provide a more fair and respectful relationship (see Ruiz, 1997). Attending college was the first step in accomplishing this goal because it allowed me opportunity, academic credentials, and mainstream respectability regardless of my lack of mainstream social capital.

While first attending college, I originally did not know what I wanted to major in. I liked working with people, but making money was something that appeared very desirable. My schooling first focused on business management at a small technical university. My minor was accounting. I wanted to use my degree to start a lowrider shop where I could fix up customized cars. This school was really helpful at increasing my academic skills but horrible when it came time to transferring credits toward a bachelor’s degree: None of the credits were accepted.

While attending Weber State University I found a class that really caught my attention: sociology. Schaefer (2000, p. 3) defines sociology as “the systematic study of social behavior and human groups.” To understand social behavior, sociologists rely on the sociological imagination. C. Wright Mills (2000, p. 5) described the concept as follows:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions.
Mills argued that the sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of self-consciousness in distinguishing between troubles within the character of the individual and those of the nature of society and in linking personal problems to larger social issues. Sociology included broad issues beyond crime, so it really supplemented my minors in criminal justice and psychology. The stratification of society includes class and racial and ethnic inequality. I was curious to explore how these concepts could have real consequences in impacting persons’ life chances.

My previous jobs were in fast food and manufacturing. Gaining entrance into the criminal justice social world required for me a mixture of education and experience. To gain this experience, I began working in volunteer and part-time positions. I was maintaining full-time school, work, and family, and so finding the extra time required giving up the social life of my younger days. This was beneficial for me because it kept me out of much of the “drama” that my friends continued to experience while hanging out in the neighborhood. I was busy trying to raise two young children with my high school sweetheart. My first volunteer job involved helping second graders at a low-income school learn to read. The students made me smile with their curiosity and enthusiasm. Helping youth perceived as unworthy to accomplish their goals had become my calling. This position led to working with Child and Family Services as a youth mentor and then as a Deputy Juvenile Probation Officer. Each of these experiences could be the narrative of this article, but I’d like to focus on my employment as a youth worker for two different juvenile correction facilities (1999–2000 and 2005). I hope by sharing these experiences I will be able to encourage new employees to continue critical thinking and speak out when observing staff misconduct.

OVERVIEW OF THE FACILITIES

Youth correction facilities in Utah and Colorado are primarily composed of different levels of housing based upon the seriousness of the offense and offender history. When most youth are committed to a facility, several less serious alternatives have been tried to correct the behavior in the past. Serious offenses do not always follow this pattern, and some cases get transferred to adult court. For example, in Utah, a juvenile court hearing has several options including (1) release; (2) detention or work camp; (3) Division of Child and Family Services custody; (4) juvenile court programs—probation, state supervision, and restitution, or fine; (5) juvenile justice system custody; and (6) transfer to adult
court. The juvenile justice system commitment facilities in Utah consist of an Observation and Assessment (O&A) unit (90-day placement when I was employed but now 45 days), community programs (usually group homes), and secure care (the length of stay can range from 1 year all the way until someone turns 21).

Working in youth corrections for the state of Utah required a bachelor’s degree whereas a private facility required only a few years of college. In Colorado, a few years of college were required. Both facilities encouraged prior experience. Therefore, my first opportunity to work within youth corrections in Utah was at a private facility. The pay and benefits were not as good as those paid by the state, but it allowed me the opportunity to work with at-risk youth. I was hired as a youth worker at an O&A unit. The entire facility housed a detention center and secure housing. The O&A unit could hold up to 18 youth at one time, and it was mixed gender. Both boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 were housed here to determine future placement. The acts of delinquency varied from sex offenses, assaults, property offenses, and drug and alcohol abuse to other minor level offenses. The youth lived in individual rooms separated by one large day room. Their day was spent primarily within the unit or at school. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were in the kitchen connected to the day room. At least one staff member monitored the day room at all times. Between the hours of 7 a.m. and 10 p.m., there were usually three to five staffers working.

The program was run on a very strict schedule: wake up, eat, shower, go to school, free time, peer groups, activities, mentoring, and bedtime. There were no surprises in the routine. Behavior was constantly monitored by staff with a plus and minus system. Misbehavior could earn a minus, which if accumulated throughout the week resulted in reduced privileges. No minuses earned additional privileges such as leadership roles, off-campus activities, and more free time. The youth evaluated their behavior during a peer group held Monday through Friday. A staff member guided the group as the youth gave each other feedback for reducing minuses and maintaining good behavior. It was very impressive to hear and see the impact of constructive feedback from peers on how to do well within the program. The staff provided the structure and the youth fit within the framework and achieved positive results. Other services offered included skill building groups, recreation, community service, counseling, and treatment plans. Each staff member was assigned one to three youth as goal kids. Staff met with goal kids weekly to evaluate behavior and discuss how to accomplish objectives. Before our goal kids went to court, various agencies involved in the welfare of the youth met to determine the best placement. When
the youth went to court, the judge asked an O&A staff member for a housing recommendation.

At the second facility in Colorado, I worked as a Youth Security Officer. It was a 240-bed residential correctional facility considered to house the “most serious and violent delinquent youth” according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The process of getting hired at this facility took longer than in Utah and required an application, common-sense test, and interview. I applied for the job in August of 2004, hired on in January 2005, and began training in February. The entire process took around 6 months, which would be overwhelming for someone needing an immediate job. The position was with the state of Colorado, and it offered better pay and benefits. The pay range at the time was $2,877 to $4,170 a month. The Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Youth Corrections ad read as follows:

The position provides corrective, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences within a structured secure program. . . . Specific responsibilities include: control movement of youth in the unit or agency; control behavior in individual or group settings; maintain constant visual observation of youth in custody; record observation of behavior [in] Daily Observations, Shift Logs, Incident Reports in automated and non-automated systems, or on other reports as necessary. . . . This employee will interact with parents, professional visitors, and law enforcement agents as necessary in person, or by telephone. Will ensure access to and/or reasonable care for all hygiene needs, medical needs, and meal service. . . . Will conduct clothed and unclothed searches to prevent contraband entry and will conduct searches of property and areas to include internal and external perimeter searches. (p. 2)

The unit where I worked included a variety of adjudications for delinquent acts including sexual, property, violent, and drug alcohol offenses. The facility was originally created in 1881 as the State Industrial School for boys and had grown to include a 15-acre campus of a variety of buildings with youth between the ages of 16 and 21 years of age. The unit was very different from the O&A unit in Utah because of its numbers of youth and size of the building and campus. The building consisted of three pods each housing from 15 to 22 youth for a total size of around 60 youth. The units were separated by thick plated glass windows. The control room was located in the center of the building and controlled the entrance and movement within the unit. Speakers allowed for monitoring of audible behavior. Within the
main day room and/or control center were three isolation rooms. Each pod included a day room, individual rooms, and an upstairs. Each pod had a clinical group leader. The clinical group leader ran individual therapy groups based on the offense and evaluated staff. Each shift had a supervisor, and the entire unit had a manager. Most youth shared a room with another individual unless they had been found to commit a sex offense. Therefore, this unit was about the size of three to four O&A units. The program followed a *normative culture* structure, which was similar to the pluses and minus system of behavior. According to the Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Youth Corrections, normative culture is “a behavior management program that is based on juveniles holding members of the peer community accountable for behaviors that violate the facility ‘norms’” (2005, p. 1). The facility was surrounded by a 25-foot curved fence, which was constantly monitored by video cameras and car patrol. The youth ate in different buildings, and recreation was usually on the main field or gym. Leading youth between buildings required strict silence, hands in pockets, and walking in a single line. The daily routine included school, free time, and moving to and from eating rooms. The facility followed a strict schedule, and so the routine was very well-known by the youth. Extracurricular activities for positive youth included track and field, basketball, football, debate team, and movies.

**MY EXPERIENCES**

In this section, I describe what it was like to work in two different youth correction facilities. I draw from memories of lived experiences, a diary, and notes taken while working in both facilities. I separate this section based on my employment during undergraduate school and later graduate school. I think this is important because of (1) the type of facility: short-term versus long-term; (2) different state strategies (Utah and Colorado); and (3) my increasing educational and ethical consciousness during graduate school.

**Undergraduate**

Working in youth corrections was completely different than what I imagined. When I started I was only 5 to 10 years older than the youth. I can clearly recall my first day. The supervisor was giving me a tour of the facility and had to go in to a meeting. He asked me to stand at the desk for a minute. While waiting, four staff members passed by, and
one asked, “What are you doing here?” I felt embarrassed, like I didn’t fit in. I was dressed professionally, but I had a “tail” (long hair in the back) and an Old English tattoo running down the inside of my forearm. I replied, “I work here now.” He looked at me rudely then walked off with the other three staff members who looked more curious than hostile. I later observed this staff member, who I will call Tim, carry the same negative and hostile behavior toward many youth in the facility. Tim was previously a police officer in Texas and carried a superior demeanor. The other staff members I came to know were great. The supervisor was really energetic and everyone reinforced and supported one another. This is where I learned the value of structure and how clear guidelines were helpful for youth and the overall unit. I felt sort of out of place with the staff, so I was working hard to fit in. My rapport with the youth was excellent. Several of the youth were those I knew while working as a deputy probation officer. The supervisor and other staff members began to teach me the expectations for the job. They advised me to not allow youth to split staff: Support one another and if in disagreement, talk about it away from the youth. They also stressed to be very careful with all interactions with females housed in the facility to prevent any allegations of misconduct and that safety and security is the most important thing to maintain at all times. The longer I worked at the facility, the more patterns I learned for explaining and confronting negative behavior.

The youth did their best to adjust to life away from family and friends. They wanted to go home. Some of the kids didn’t receive visits whereas others had a lot of family support. The youth housed at the facility, like in the surrounding county, were primarily white. There was, however, a higher proportion of minorities housed within the facility. In my unit, seven of the nine staff members were white, along with one Tongan and one Chicano, me. Most of the staff members at the facility were Mormon with ties to a small town in Utah. With the exception of Tim, I considered my colleagues friends. We worked together to encourage the youth to make better decisions. I handled the day-to-day management of activities, bathroom breaks, lunches, dinners, cleanup, and treatment groups. I later came to learn through experience that having a mixed gender unit brought with it many challenges of flirting, dating, and trying to impress one another. I really enjoyed working with kids to help them accomplish their goals.

For some reason, Tim constantly gave me a hard time. I did not like how he interacted with most of the kids of color. He seemed to give them a harder time, including one youth who had been adjudicated
delinquent for the charge of statutory rape. He was 16, and she was 15. The two had consensual sex, but the parents filed charges. He was black, and she was white. Another youth was forced to strip naked in the bathroom because Tim accused him of hiding contraband. The young boy cried as I stood there observing Tim direct verbal threats. Tim maintained a good relationship with the other white staffers. Some of them seemed to admire his behavior; thus, I never complained to supervisors about how he treated me or many of the youth. I put up with it, and the youth had no choice. This is something I continue to regret to this day.

As it turned out, the facility was going through some downsizing, and Tim was let go. I was the most recently hired and was required to switch to graveyard shift for a period of time. Working graveyards, going to school after my shift, and managing the day-to-day schedule of my family was tremendously difficult. I wasn’t getting much sleep. Fortunately, it lasted only for 2 or 3 months. On the graveyard shift, two staff members conducted bed checks every 15 minutes to make sure everyone was in the room and sleeping OK, and youth on suicide watch were checked every 5 minutes.

Overall, I enjoyed working as a youth worker at this O&A unit. I really liked working to help encourage youth to succeed. I liked how the staff worked closely together to create a supportive environment. I didn’t like Tim and how he continually abused his authority. For the most part, restraints were rare. Verbal de-escalation was essential although we were trained in pressure points. When I applied for graduate school, I was also going through the process to work in Youth Corrections for the state of Utah, which would have included better pay and better benefits. I wanted to work in the city where I grew up. This area was perceived as having more hard-core and gang involved youth. I wanted to work more with this population as it matched my background. I wanted to help them accomplish their dreams. When I was accepted to the University of Colorado to begin pursuing my doctorate, I resigned from my position in youth corrections to pursue the potential benefits that might exist with school.

**Graduate Years**

Graduate school was difficult, and each year I wanted to quit. I wanted to work directly with individuals considered to be criminals. I didn’t want to talk about it. I wanted to provide motivation and encourage alternatives. School seemed too much like an ivory tower and did not relate to my lived experience (see Acuña, 1998; see also Ladner, 1973).
I enjoyed mentoring students, but Boulder, Colorado, and the students who attended the university were very different from the culture and people of my background. Many of these young adults were rich and from educationally privileged backgrounds. I wondered whether a doctorate degree could still help me to accomplish my goals. I decided to go back to working within youth corrections, and I considered leaving academia. I was at the all-but-dissertation (ABD) stage, so I had already finished all of my comprehensive exams. My doctoral chair was really worried about whether I would finish or give it all up. I too didn’t know what I would end up doing.

The training for my new position lasted 2 weeks. It began early in the morning and lasted all day. The trainees came from a variety of backgrounds. The first week focused on policies and the second week was devoted to continuum of force and pressure points. When my first shift began, I felt like a rookie learning many things from scratch. The facility had several rules that were new, and I was expected to hold youth accountable at all times. Whereas at the Utah facility there were 4 to 6 staff interacting with 15 to 18 youth at one time, I was now placed in a pod of one staff member per 15 to 21 youth. Each staff member was required to run the pod. The other staffers primarily rotated, stayed in the control room, or ran the visits or other errands that were needed. The only time a staff member was not in a pod was when the entire pod was on lockdown, and all doors were locked. This lower staff-to-youth ratio brought increased challenges. It was more difficult to catch everything, and horseplay was very common. The youth learned that being aggressive could prevent bullying from other youth. I had to constantly monitor and challenge several things such as noise level, language, and movement within the pod. The staff member ensured that all doors were locked when the youth were in the day room. Television time was limited to certain hours on the weekends and after 9 p.m. on weekdays for the youth who were at higher levels of positive behavior. There were limits on how many phone calls were allowed each week. Recreation time was only for youth who were positive and not for those on the Juvenile Disciplinary Program. The youth on the disciplinary program were under several rules, were closely watched, and required a positive youth to escort them around the unit. Eating included many additional rules. Youth needed to ask before dumping food trays, and only level 2 and higher youth could get extra juice. No sharing of food, talking between tables, or looking out windows was allowed, and tables needed to be wiped before leaving.

Overall, I felt overwhelmed by a structure that overcontrolled without enough staff support to make it consistent. Some staff members
enforced the rules strictly and others loosely. There were far too many youth per staff member. The youth felt too little structure to guide their behavior. The staff who had worked at the facility for a long time told me that things were worse in the past; there was about 80 youth per 1 staff member. A lawsuit in the early 1990s led to many changes and improvements. I liked many of the youth, but I struggled to show them a better alternative within a structure that was working against me. At least 8 out of every 10 youth in the facility were Latino, black, or Native American.

I came to encounter a staff member who was very similar to Tim from O&A. I will call him Bill. Bill and I started off getting along well. We talked about boxing. My first and last names are associated with one of the most famous boxers in history, and so the conversation is one I’ve been having all my life. A few of the youth in the facility who were Latino began telling me on my first day that this staff member was racist and abusive. Not wanting to divide staff, I listened and said that we have been getting along. A young Latino who was about to be released told me to be careful. A black staff member who was working overhead the conversation and told me he concurred with this youth’s overall assessment of Bill. I was placed primarily on the back-end shift, which was Thursday, Friday, Saturday; then, I worked on the front-end shift on Sunday. Bill was the supervisor of the front-end shift, so we worked together only 1 day a week. The front-end staff was all white, and the back-end staff included 3 black staff members. I was the only Chicano employee, and this matched my experience with O&A. There were a total of 15 staffers who worked in this unit including myself. Two were female and 4 were from ethnic minority groups. I made good friends with the majority of staff members; Bill later became the exception. The longer I worked at the facility, the more I noticed a much different presence every time Bill worked. He had the youth locked in their rooms more. He was more verbally aggressive. Youth were afraid of him, and he seemed to like this. He was also very active whenever a youth needed to be restrained. In fact, probably half of the staff members were really pumped up and excited whenever there was going to be a restraint. I found this kind of strange because I primarily used verbal de-escalation, and I was overall very good at this technique. I could calm down even some of the most upset youth, and I took pride in this skill.

Bill was my supervisor, but we began to disagree on tactics after a restraint that he became involved in. It all began on a Sunday morning. Bill came into the unit in a grumpy mood. All of the youth were still sleeping around 8:30 a.m., and breakfast was about to begin. Bill
walked into a pod, and suddenly, one of the youth’s buzzers went off. I was working at the control desk, and I asked, “Can I help you,” through the intercom. I then heard a great deal of noise in the background. Two staff members ran into the pod to assist Bill. I heard cuffs applied; then, I saw Bill walk the youth, who I will call Mark, toward the isolation room with his arms far behind his back. Bill pushed Mark onto the metal bed and the other two staff members came to assist, but before they could apply the foot and arm restraints, Bill slammed Mark three to four times onto the metal bed. The other staff member came out and grabbed a mat to put under Mark. Bill then lifted up Mark’s arms behind his back, and Mark began making coughing noises, as if he could not breathe. Another staff member arrived, who I will call Shirley, and she started going through the documenting process for placing a youth in a 3-point restraint in the isolation room. She then followed procedure and made a call to the unit manager. Bill reported that the youth hit him, and I asked, “Are you okay?” and he replied, “Yeah, I just need to cool off for a minute.”

Mark had been in 3-point restraints for an hour and a half when I started to complain that we were violating policy. Shirley, who was friends with Bill, notified me that Mark had been spitting at the floor off and on for the first 39 minutes, which demonstrated lack of compliance. I walked into the isolation room, and asked Mark how he was doing. We had good rapport with one another, and he was just lying there during most of my checks. Mark told me that Bill was harassing him, so he responded negatively to the rude behavior. I told Mark to calm down and we would get him out of there soon, just be compliant. During another check—these occur every 15 minutes—Mark told me his wrists were hurting. I told Shirley that the handcuffs were very tight and maybe we should loosen them a little. She told me “handcuffs are not supposed to be comfortable and that Mark should have thought of that before assaulting staff.” I agreed youth should not assault staff, but I said, “Handcuffs are for safety and security and not punishment.” She asked if his hands were blue. I said no, and so she dismissed my comment. I told her I was not in agreement with the continued 3-point because Mark had been for the most part lying face first on the bed. There was no lack of compliance. Shirley told me that she thought Bill would leave him there all day. I told her that I would no longer sign his observation paper on the isolation room door. I mentioned that maybe I should call the unit manager, and she said that I should talk to Bill before taking such action.

I then walked into a pod while the youth were locked down and talked with Bill about removing Mark from the 3-point restraints. Bill
replied that he could leave him like this because Mark was a threat to staff. I disagreed. It was under Bill’s direction that Mark remained in 3-point. Bill did not want him to be released. To cool off, I walked the parents who had finished visiting several youth back to the main office. This allowed me some time to leave the building, collect my thoughts, and assess my evaluation of the situation. Bill and Shirley must have used their time in a similar manner because when I returned, Shirley told me they’d loosened Mark’s handcuffs a little. I felt relieved that I had attained some progress. Shortly after, I was working in the pod where the dispute occurred when some of the youth whom I had a good relationship with told me that Bill started the confrontation. They said Bill grabbed Mark and slammed his head into the wall to make sure that he hurt him. They thought Mark should file a grievance. Later in the day, Mark was released from the 3-point restraints and continued to stay in isolation. This was my first conflict with Bill, and several more were to develop over the next several months.

Bill and I no longer really talked. He barked orders at me, and I confronted him about his demeaning behavior. I told Bill that I was not going to tolerate his abuse because I was not one of the youth. I told him I did not care if he was my supervisor because he was not above me. I was referring to his white male racial entitlement and his demeaning treatment of youth of color. I told Bill that he cannot treat youth or me as inferior and do whatever he wanted. A few days later, one of my goal kids was restrained by Bill, and his face had been dragged along the carpet. My goal kid called 9-1-1 afterward when he had phone privileges and filed a complaint. When I began my shift, I was briefed on the situation and realized that Bill’s negative behavior needed to stop. All of Bill’s attacks were directly targeted against black and brown youth. I tried to change Bill’s behavior by talking with more senior staff but received no encouragement. I was told by the clinical manager to listen to my supervisor and was scolded for telling my supervisor that he is not above me. After receiving no help, I turned in my 2-week notice to resign my position. When word got out that I was leaving, several of the other staff members reported to me that they too were in disagreement with how Bill behaved and that they were not like this. The youth in the pods where I worked were upset that I was leaving because they related to me. My goal kids wanted me to continue hanging in there, but with full-time work, working on my dissertation, and teaching two classes, plus managing my family, I was falling apart from the stress. During undergraduate and graduate school, I relieved my stress through exercise and boxing, but lately my hectic schedule did not allow any time for these extracurricular activities.
I quit my job at a point when I did not have additional employment. I was not signed up to teach summer or fall classes. I wanted to leave academia, but even more, I really hated what was going on within the juvenile justice facility where I worked in Colorado. I took a huge risk in quitting, but everything worked out. I received a phone call a few weeks later notifying me that I had received the Society for the Study of Social Problems Race and Ethnicity Minority Graduate Scholarship for Scholarship and Activism. My final year of my dissertation was covered. I now had the time to finish my dissertation and enter the job market.

**CONCLUSION**

After many years devoted to youth mentorship in a variety of programs (e.g., helping second graders read, Division of Child and Family Services, juvenile probation, and youth corrections), I became disillusioned with my ability to create change within the system. I had spent around 13 months working full-time in two different facilities: one in which I probably would have continued working had I not received the opportunity to attend graduate school and the second where I struggled daily. I benefited from a tremendous amount of hands-on knowledge that continues to inform my understanding and insight. I believe this insight can inform others about the difference between what is taught and what is practiced.

The quality of any youth correction facility is very dependent upon the structure of the program and the qualifications and personalities of the staff. Developing a structure that will help empower youth requires resources, training, and adequate supervision. Youth corrections alone is unable to challenge the inequalities that are present in wider society, such as racism and classism, but it can help youth make better decisions so that they are less likely to come under the radar of the criminal (adult) justice system. Preventing future misbehavior will require staff that does not mirror problematic behaviors present in the wider society.

What I learned about myself was that I am really against individuals who abuse their authority. Much abuse of power was directed at youth of color. Individuals such as Tim and Bill were often liked by their peers. They were leaders. They were aggressive. They felt superior. In their world, I was not welcome. More than likely, individuals such as Tim and Bill continue to work in the criminal justice system and sadly have supporters who do not confront and challenge. These
individuals cause more problems and take away from everyone who is trying to make the best of the structure in place. I think the biggest lesson here is the importance of holding central the values and ethics I stood for when I started. Staff members need to be fair and provide positive mentorship to youth in order to help them pursue an alternative outcome in their lives. I was able to accomplish more through verbal de-escalation and rapport. I followed the golden rule of treating others like I wanted to be treated. I have no idea where the youth I mentored at both correctional facilities are now. Maybe one or more of these individuals will be in a college course reading this book. I hope they are doing well and realize that I really cared deeply about helping them to achieve a better life. Their day-to-day encouragement was important for me in continuing to give. I also miss the friendships created with staff from working together through stressful situations. I think we all tried to follow a model to demonstrate better alternatives. After leaving youth corrections, I continued to target the misbehavior of those in positions of authority. I made it my mission to no longer remain silenced when there is strong evidence that something is not right. Racism is present in many institutions, and it is sad to see certain kinds of individuals in positions of authority, especially because they can continue to abuse and still receive support from colleagues.

REFERENCES


Colorado Department of Human Services Division of Youth Corrections. (2005, June). *Policy 14.1*. Available at [http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/dyc/PDFs/P-14-1.pdf](http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/dyc/PDFs/P-14-1.pdf)


**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Describe how elements in your personal background—your family, neighborhood(s) you grew up in, education, racial and ethnic identity, major personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes, et cetera—may impact how you approach your prospective job or career?

2. If you personally witnessed a coworker mistreat a person under correctional supervision (juvenile or adult, incarcerated or in the community), how would you react? Would it matter if the person was your friend? What if the person had more influence than you, such as a supervisor? What would be your concerns about reporting or not reporting this person?

3. Do you think that it is possible to reduce social inequality by working as a frontline employee in corrections? What kinds of actions can a worker take to improve equality? Would one even have the power to do so? Is it appropriate for one to be an “activist” in such a position, or should one “just do his or her job”? Explain.