Combating Juvenile Crime: Youth Official Argues for Comprehensive Solutions

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Combating juvenile crime
Youth official argues for comprehensive solutions

BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TERE MILLER

Gwendolyn Chunn, the highest-ranking official responsible for preventing juvenile delinquency in the state of North Carolina, offered her candid assessment of problems plaguing her field during an intense three-day visit to the Law School in October. As director for the state's Health and Human Services' Division for Youth, Chunn oversees North Carolina's training schools and secure detention facilities, and reports directly to the governor. For the past 10 years, she demonstrated bipartisan resilience, holding her position under both Republican and Democrat governors.

Chunn shared with students, faculty and local youth authorities her unique perspective on achieving cost-effective, long-term solutions to juvenile crime. "You can't make a sustained, lasting impact on delinquency without a comprehensive approach. No single, silver bullet-like boot camp or incarceration is going to make the problem disappear."

In Chunn's experience, early detection and treatment of kids with problems is key for two reasons. First, the problem rarely goes away and frequently gets worse. Second, Chunn believes intervention should begin at the first sign of trouble. Yet the assessments of people who are experienced in spotting kids with problems are often ignored.

"Teachers can spot children lacking pro-social skills by the second or third grade, yet teachers' evaluations are rarely given weight," she said. Chunn also believes that a comprehensive approach to delinquency prevention must include working with the child's family unit because "the family is the primary reinforcer of pro-social behavior."

Sponsored by the Law School and the UB Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender, Chunn's visit added another dimension to the discussion of juvenile crime in law school classes. In addition to giving a public lecture to students and faculty, Chunn led discussions in two law school classes focusing on children and crime: Prisoner Law Seminar, taught by Associate Professor Teri Miller, and the State as Custodian, co-taught by Associate Professors Susan V. Mangold and Teri Miller.

Chunn's visit also fostered ties between the Law School and local youth authorities. While meeting with the commissioner of Erie County's Youth Services Division, Nathan Hare and his staff, and the director of youth services for the City of Buffalo, Michael Norwood, Chunn discussed the unique similarity between the statutory age for juvenile disposition in New York and North Carolina. They are two of only four states that try juveniles as adults after age 16. Chunn described her meeting with local youth authorities as a rare opportunity to share successes and failures with others pursuing the same goal — delinquency prevention — and to exchange ideas for improving youth services.

Indeed, Chunn took back with her to Raleigh, N.C., Erie County's idea of educating parents about how to keep their children out of the county's secure detention facility. She said, "This kind of information aimed at parents goes farther than the more commonly available information about the detention system once your child is in custody."