

Juvenile Rehabilitation

ABC News *Primetime*

New York, New York

Chris Cuomo, *Correspondent*

Joseph Diaz, Anna Sims-Phillips, and Jon Meyersohn, *Producers*

COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

The ABC News *Primetime* program “Juvenile Rehabilitation” begins with video of what most juvenile prisons in America look like: “kids in orange jumpsuits, locked behind bars under constant guard.” This powerfully affecting program, however, has a different focus, taking viewers inside Missouri’s innovative juvenile justice model. In Missouri, juvenile offenders live together in small groups in dorm rooms rather than cell blocks. There are no guards, no lockdown. Youth in these facilities all receive “indeterminate” sentences, so that their release is contingent on their progress towards rehabilitation. To highlight the Missouri model, ABC News spent a year inside two juvenile justice facilities and tracked the everyday lives of five troubled youth. Viewers can experience firsthand a rehabilitative approach that stresses group therapy, discipline, responsibility, and hugs administered by dedicated professionals. ABC was able to gain remarkable access to these facilities and, amazingly, secured permissions to show the youth without the “blurred heads” typically seen on television. This allows them to speak for themselves and enables viewers to see them as real kids, struggling with their own family problems, life challenges, and even personal demons. Correspondent Chris Cuomo cites statistics asserting that the recidivism rate for offenders in the Missouri juvenile justice system is one quarter that of other states—and yet required costs are half that of lockdown facilities. While not all of the stories in the program end in success, viewers are left to ponder whether Missouri might indeed provide a model that other states should consider for their own juvenile justice systems. For so poignantly bringing this to a national audience, “Juvenile Rehabilitation” richly merits our recognition and viewers’ attention.



Chris Cuomo



Joseph Diaz

INTERVIEW with contributors to “Juvenile Rehabilitation”

“Juvenile Rehabilitation” was a team effort with Chris Cuomo, chief legal correspondent and 20/20 co-anchor, and ABC News Primetime producers Joseph Diaz, Anna Sims-Phillips, and Jon Meyersohn. They answered interview questions as a group.

What was your role in creating, producing, or disseminating your Silver Gavel Award-winning work?

Joseph Diaz and Anna Sims-Phillips spent months at several juvenile rehabilitation facilities in Missouri, videotaping with inmates, therapists, staff, and family members. The project took several months of planning and negotiation to initiate, and was taped over the course of twelve months, mostly using small cameras to capture powerful and intimate moments and not disrupt the normal flow of daily activity. Chris Cuomo and producer Jon Meyersohn visited the facilities, conducted interviews, and together the four of us collaborated to produce this unique hour of network television that highlights the possibilities and challenges facing those involved in juvenile justice. The result is a penetrating and intimate portrait of an important development in the troubled area of juvenile crime and punishment.

Where did the initial idea for “Juvenile Rehabilitation” come from?

Joseph Diaz found and pitched the idea, and was responsible for developing it for ABC News *Primetime*. He worked closely with Missouri officials to allow virtually unfettered access to the juvenile system. Our vision for the project was to experience

firsthand how Missouri’s unique approach works and whether it holds the answer to America’s broken juvenile justice system. Being there over an extended period of time was vital to see the transformation in the youth. Joseph also worked closely with veteran producers Anna Sims-Phillips and Jon Meyersohn, and with correspondent Chris Cuomo, to shoot, write, craft, and edit more than 100 hours of videotape into the final product. The final product was the result of many hours of writing, rewriting, screening, and dedicated editing by a small team of talented videotape editors at ABC News.

What resources were required to develop your program?

In a tough economic climate, when news organizations, including ours, are slashing budgets and personnel, *Primetime* dedicated great time, effort, and resources reporting this story. Joseph and Anna devoted months of their lives, literally living in Missouri, and even relocating their families for a period of time. ... We also couldn’t have done this story without the cooperation of Missouri’s Division of Youth Services, which opened up their entire system to ABC News. Access to minors is unprecedented, especially in television. Typical stories on juvenile justice include heavy blurring of faces. Ours had none.

How does your work foster public understanding? What do you see as its public impact?

Following the broadcast, Rep. Chris Murphy (D-CT), conducted congressional hearings. Partly as a result, states have been mandated to reform their juvenile justice systems. The hearings were a result of a screening of our report. Since then, these states have consulted with Missouri for assistance in implementing this effective and cost-efficient model. In all, we tried to show—in real human terms—how society’s so-called “bad kids” and juvenile predators may actually be some of its most damaged, and why Missouri treats these fragile individuals not as criminals but as children with a chance to turn their lives around.

What does winning the Silver Gavel Award from the ABA mean to you?

Winning the Silver Gavel Award from the ABA is one of the highest honors that can be bestowed on a journalist. It is a rare privilege and a responsibility. It demonstrates that good, solid journalism can still be a highlight of network television, that documentaries can make a difference and affect lives, and that viewers respond to important stories.

EXCERPT

ACT 1

CHRIS CUOMO, Correspondent: This is what juvenile prison in America usually looks like. Thousands of kids in orange jumpsuits, locked behind bars under constant guard. But here in America’s heartland, it could not look or sound more different. ...

CUOMO: (VO) Her first arrest, age nine. Rachel is 15.

RACHEL, JUVENILE INMATE: I would get high and I just wouldn’t care anymore. I just ran away. I didn’t know how to face it.

CUOMO: (VO) Rachel stole nearly a quarter of a million dollars in cash and jewelry from a neighbor, then fled in a stolen car.

RACHEL: I was gonna go to Minnesota.

CUOMO: (OC) Just because?

RACHEL: Just to leave and start over, but I thought I could do it by myself and running away with the law chasing me.

CUOMO: (VO) She made it all the way to Illinois before being caught. A judge sentenced her to the Rosa Parks Center, one of Missouri’s 32 juvenile jails. But it doesn’t look like a traditional prison. Set on a college campus, it’s part of a radical and controversial model that could just change the way America looks at juvenile crime.

CUOMO: (OC) There are 100,000 kids in the juvenile system right now. The question is, can they be saved? Well, here in Missouri, they’re doing things to help kids that you won’t find anywhere else. Have they found an answer? Come see for yourself.

ACT 4

CUOMO: (VO) You may be wondering how much more all of this intensive therapy and time costs compared to traditional juvenile prisons. In fact, the cost per child in Missouri is half the national average, \$50,000 a year.

CUOMO: (OC): How does this wind up not being more expensive?

TIM DECKER, Head, Missouri Division of Youth Services: Well, it really gets down to what you put your money into.

CUOMO: (VO) Tim Decker, head of the Missouri juvenile system, says the familiar model of large prisons and boot camps doesn’t work. So, for the past two decades, Missouri has gone a different way.

DECKER: And we put our money into surrounding these young people with caring adults to help them learn the kinds of skills that they’re gonna need to be successful. Other programs put their money into fences and isolation cells and all kinds of hardware security, which doesn’t really make anyone any safer nor does it help young people turn their lives around.

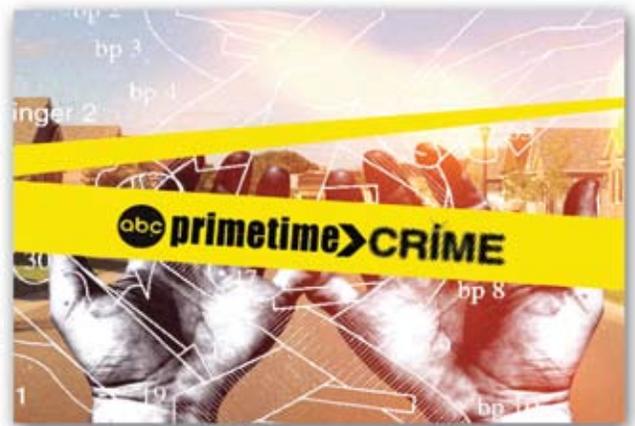
CUOMO: (VO) Fact. A recent federal report said excessive violence in juvenile prisons is cause for national overhaul of the system. In Missouri, the rate of violence is less than just about every other state. But this may be the most important statistic. Only 10% of kids end up in adult prisons. In some states, that number is as high as 40%. Question is, why isn’t it done this way everywhere?

DECKER: Change is difficult.

CUOMO: (OC) Isn’t it a social stigma argument, I mean, that people don’t want to reward bad behavior. Because you have never heard a politician, or at least I haven’t, say, “I’m gonna be softer on crime. I’m gonna spend more money on our prisoners to help them.” They always say, “I’m tough on crime. I’ll build more prisons.”

DECKER: This approach is much tougher than young people spending their time sitting in a cell. This is far more rigorous. And for a young person to go through this program and complete this program takes a great deal of effort on their part.

CUOMO: (VO) But no amount of therapy or rehabilitation can erase the harsh realities of life on the outside.



To learn more about “Juvenile Rehabilitation,” go to the ABC News Primetime website at abcnews.go.com/Primetime/missouri-sets-standard-juvenile-detention/story?id=8510425