

1943

Boys Home at Reading, The

Paul N. Schaeffer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paul N. Schaeffer, Boys Home at Reading, The, 34 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 150 (1943-1944)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

THE BOYS HOME AT READING

Paul N. Schaeffer*

In a recent issue of this JOURNAL there appeared an interesting article entitled "Can You Trust Them?" In it the author tells of the system established in Toledo by Judge Alexander according to which children charged with delinquency are, after one week in the Detention Home, eligible to a "privilege status" under which they may go swimming on Monday nights, go without supervision to a movie on Friday nights, to a sports event on Saturday and to their own home for dinner on Sunday.

In this plan we can see a recognition by Judge Alexander of the fact that in the initial stages of the cases of many delinquent juveniles, rigorous and extended detention is both unnecessary and socially undesirable. Into the dreariness of detention, he has introduced some forms of recreation which are enjoyed by the normal boys of the community.

In view of our own experience, I have long questioned the actual and social need for the existence of a house of detention in all save the larger centers of population. And I am critical of our schools and institutions for the correction of juvenile offenders. Our society is founded upon the principles that the family is the best form of human organization in which to rear children and that each individual must, if he is to live within the law, be trained to live harmoniously with his fellow human beings. We are all, or should be, social beings. In the normal family home there is authority fixed in some individual—usually the father—and there is also the opportunity, subject to the direction by the individual in authority, of each member of the home to associate with persons of his approximate age living in other homes in the neighborhood or community. There are at least two phases to the life of a normal family: the association of persons within the home and the association with persons without the home. Attendance at churches and schools and membership in scout organizations, etc., are but phases of the individual's associations outside of the home.

If the home be, under our social arrangement, the best organization in which to rear children, why do we discard it upon the first—or second or third—appearance of social non-conformity by a child? Does not such social non-conformity indicate that the organization of the child's home probably is defective or ineffectual? If so, are good results to be looked for from discarding a good normal home influence upon that child or from establishing and protecting it? The answer, we think, is obvious.

*President Judge, Court of Quarter Sessions, Reading, Pa.

Of course, we are here considering only mentally healthy children with an I. Q. of at least 70.

Children who are mentally ill or whose intelligence is so low that they are unable to rationalize the problems of social adjustment, constitute distinct problems.

In Reading, Pennsylvania, we have had, since August 1, 1912, a home for delinquent boys, which has neither locks nor bars and from which any boy can run away at will. We do not have, and do not wish to have, a house of detention in the ordinary sense. When a boy is apprehended by the police or probation officer for any delinquency, our established procedure is, after taking the boy's story, to take him forthwith to his own home and, after explanations, to place him in the custody of his parents. There are some rare exceptions to this practice—constituting possibly three per cent of the cases. These consist chiefly of runaway boys from other communities or boys who, there is apparent reason to believe, will not stay in their own homes. A few of these are placed in the Boys Home until the time for hearing in court; but where there exists a valid fear that they will run away, they are held in a special room—not a cell—at City Hall. All boys held in City Hall are brought before the Juvenile Court judge within 24 hours unless a Sunday intervenes.

Our experience with this system has been highly satisfactory. We have averaged not one case a year in which the boy who was returned to his own home, has failed to appear in court at the time designated. During the interval our probation officers have made several visits to the home; these visits manifestly have a socially desirable effect upon the home itself and upon the members of the family. Most families endeavor, during that period, to prove that they are capable of taking care of the boy and that their home is a fit place for him. And during that interval of two to four weeks, the probation officer may take the boy to a physician for a physical examination—if that appear to be helpful—and to the Berks County Guidance Institute to visit the psychiatrist and psychologist. It is only when the case study is reasonably complete that the boy comes to court.

Do not boys who have been returned to their own homes before hearing, commit new offenses? Yes, some few do—but mighty few. I seriously doubt whether we average one-half of one per cent. If the boy be normal mentally, he, like every normal person about to face a test, will endeavor to put himself in the best possible position to obtain a desirable result. We have found boys who resented, as a foolish insinuation against their good judgment, a question of social irregularities occurring since their apprehension. They try their "darndest" to prove that they are worthy of another chance.

The Berks County Boys Home and the boys residing there are under the supervision of Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Miller who are the only employees. They are Dad and Ma to all their boys. Except for the temporary placements prior to hearing in court, which do not exceed three or four a year, all commitments and all discharges are made by the Juvenile Court after hearing. All commitments are for an indefinite term; the time of discharge depends upon the boy's adjustment and attitude and upon the character of his own home and of members of his family. Many boys go home after twelve or fifteen months; some remain three, four or five years.

The Boys Home is in reality a good family home.

Its boys attend the public schools of the city. They go back and forth to school each day just as other boys do. Each Sunday they go to a church of their own denomination. With the approval of Dad Miller, they may join a neighborhood boy's club, or a troupe of Boy Scouts, and they may from time to time visit their families and receive visits from them. Upon the street and in the Home they behave like normal children as we want them to do. In the Home they sleep in dormitory rooms housing four or six; they have a library and study room, a game room, a gymnasium, and a shop where they can tinker at their hobbies. They assist Mrs. Miller in the chores; they peel potatoes, set the table and wash the dishes.

By a method of trial and error, we have learned that twenty-five is the maximum number of boys who can, with good results, be housed in this Home at any one time. The building is large enough to accommodate a greater number, but we have found that a family of twenty-five active and potentially troublesome boys is the largest that Dad and Mrs. Miller can manage successfully. A greater number tends to make the Boys Home an institution rather than a home. The difference between these concepts is real and of the utmost importance. We believe that this difference is a decisive factor between success and failure.

Housefathers and housemothers of less understanding, sympathy, patience and self-control than Mr. and Mrs. Miller may not be able to succeed with as many as twenty-five.

That number has reasonably sufficed to answer our county's problem boy cases. Since Pearl Harbor, there have been occasions when the Juvenile Court has had before it boys who it believed needed the life of the Home but for whom there was no room. We will not enlarge that number; if the number of such boys increases to warrant the expense, we shall endeavor to open a second boys' home of the same character in some other section of the city.

Berks County has a population of about 240,000. The City of Reading, which is the county seat, has a population of almost half that number and is highly industrialized. There are also 30 in-

corporated boroughs, the largest of which has a population of about 5,000. There are hundreds of square miles of cultivated farms and of woodland.

The existence of the Boys Home has saved hundreds of boys from the experience of a commitment to our so-called reformatories. Instead of being compelled to associate exclusively with institutional officials and the worst boys garnered by the courts from the four corners of the state, these boys have had the opportunity of living as normal boys in the general community. They associate with the boys of the neighborhood. With them they travel back and forth to school. Like ordinary boys, they share with these pals of the vicinity. Whenever a moving picture is shown at the Home, half the seats are filled by outside boys who are the guests of Dad Miller's boys. These latter are not branded by the public as "bad boys," but are looked upon as boys who need care and oversight.

Our experience has been sufficiently broad to justify our conviction that the principle of operation is correct. In the 31 years almost 800 boys have resided in the Home and have been discharged from it. We have no accurate statistics, but Mr. Miller is of the opinion that not more than 15 per cent of these boys have ever thereafter been convicted of any offense. During the years many of the former Boys Home boys have married and reared families of their own. Mr. Miller knows of about 100 such "grandchildren" and makes the statement that not one of these "grandchildren" has ever been in court.

We believe it would be a truly worth while project if some foundation or citizen would finance a study of the later histories of these 800 boys.

So far as we know this Boys Home is unique. The story of its origin is interesting. In 1911 four boys, one aged 17 and three aged 18 years, perpetrated three armed robberies and one murder in our midst. Three of these were Reading boys and the fourth was a Philadelphian. All of them had been in trouble with the law but before their appearance in court, had not known each other. In separate proceedings two of these boys had been committed to the Glen Mills School by the court of Berks County and one to the same school by the Philadelphia court. While in Glen Mills, they became acquainted. Within the space of a few months after the last of these three had been released from Glen Mills, the Glen Mills parolees and also the fourth (who had never been in Glen Mills) were, for new and separate offenses, committed by the courts of these counties to the Pennsylvania Industrial Reformatory at Huntingdon. While inmates there, the four of them resolved to band together as soon as they were all free again. They met in Reading and started on a career of big crime. Within eleven days

they perpetrated one murder and a series of armed robberies extending from Reading to Petersburg, Virginia.

When their identities and prior histories became known, Mr. William McCormick, the editor of the *Reading Herald*, began to write editorials in which he discussed their careers and their crimes. He pointed out that when initially committed, they were but small pilferers; each had stolen a few articles of trifling value. But after about three years in the only institutions provided by the Commonwealth, they had developed from petty thieves operating singly to big-time gangsters who planned and audaciously executed some of the most serious crimes known to the law. If such be the result, Mr. McCormick asked, why send our troublesome boys to distant institutions where they must associate with the worst boys of every other county? Why not provide our own place for them and keep them in our own community where their family and friends can see them? Surely the result could not be any worse.

Mr. McCormick's campaign bore fruit. Citizens became interested. Mr. W. H. Luden offered to provide the place. He deeded the property to the County of Berks upon condition that the home be under the management of the judges of our Court of Quarter Sessions. Mr. and Mrs. Miller were secured. Politics has been avoided.

The results have been surprisingly good. Berks County has uniformly had far less than its quota of inmates in the state reformatories. The Boys Home has not eliminated our need for such institutions; there are some boys who will not stay at the Boys Home. When they run away, they demonstrate their need for placement in an institution of restraint. But the number of such boys is relatively small.

Our home is a *boys'* home. There is a world of difference between a boy and a youth. A boy of fifteen years or under is likely to succeed but a boy of 16 or over, when admitted, is likely to fail in the Home. The youth prides himself upon the fact that he is no longer a "kid"; he wants to regard himself as a man. It is a blow to his dignity to be committed to a boys' home—and he resents it. I have known boys of 16 and 17 years who, declining to stay at the Boys Home, frankly preferred to be committed to jail. But for boys of the impressionable age of the early teens, this home under the leadership of Dad and Ma Miller has performed a splendid task of social correction and adjustment.

For the boys 16 to 20 we hope some day to have a Youth's Home, to which instead of to jail or reformatory, boys of that age group can be sent, either to continue their scholastic careers or to work at jobs in industry or commerce, under the supervision of another Dad and Ma Miller.