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Project Assists Juvenile Offenders

Many youngsters in juvenile detention centers have substance abuse problems, and many will wind up back in detention after their release, according to David Hawkins, associate professor of social work and director of the Center for Social Welfare Research at the School of Social Work.

Statistics show that 47 percent of the King County youths placed in Washington correctional institutions between October and December of last year had been committed previously.

At Echo Glen Children's Center, a maximum-security juvenile institution,

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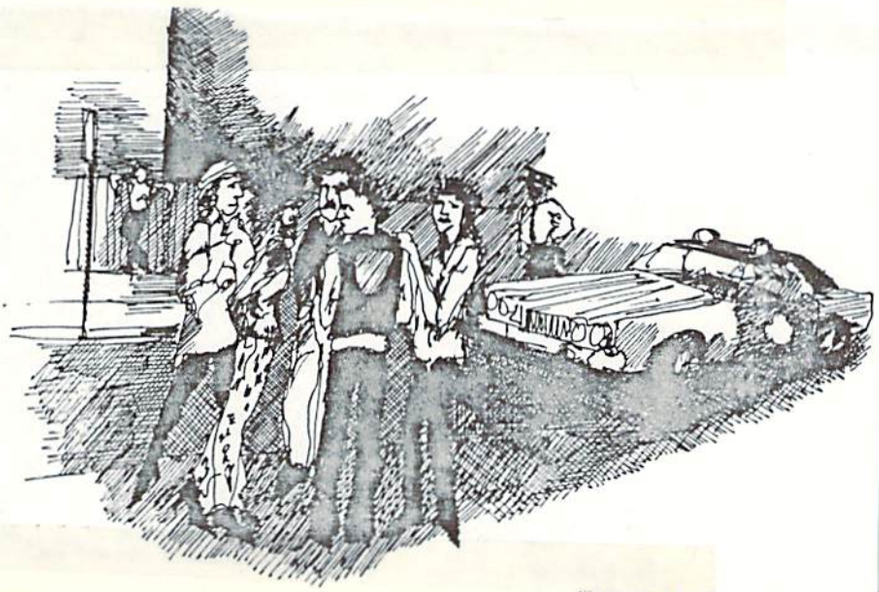

Illustration by Paula McArdle

Project Assists

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68 percent of the inmates have drug problems, and 65 percent had used drugs several times weekly in the year before they were admitted.

To find a way to prevent a return to illegal behavior and substance abuse among delinquent adolescents, co-investigators Hawkins and Richard Catalano, research assistant professor of social work, have begun a three-and-a-half year research project, known as Project Adapt. The project is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The researchers are testing the effectiveness of a program they are using with 75 youths aged 12 to 21 years who will be returning to King and Pierce Counties after their incarceration at Echo Glen.

Program participants attend a 10-week skills training class that includes learning the consequences of actions, how to solve problems, how to avoid trouble, how to have legal fun, how to make friends, and how to say no.

David Hawkins, associate professor and director of the Center for Social Welfare Research (left), and Richard Catalano, research assistant professor.

"Most of these kids don't know how to avoid getting into trouble, how to meet and keep positive friends, or even how to introduce themselves," explains Kathleen Burgoyne, clinical director of the project.

At the same time the youngsters are in the skills-training group, they are assigned a case counselor who works closely with them to reinforce these skills. The counselor also goes with them on visits to help them begin positive involvements with family, schools, work, and social organizations before they leave Echo Glen.

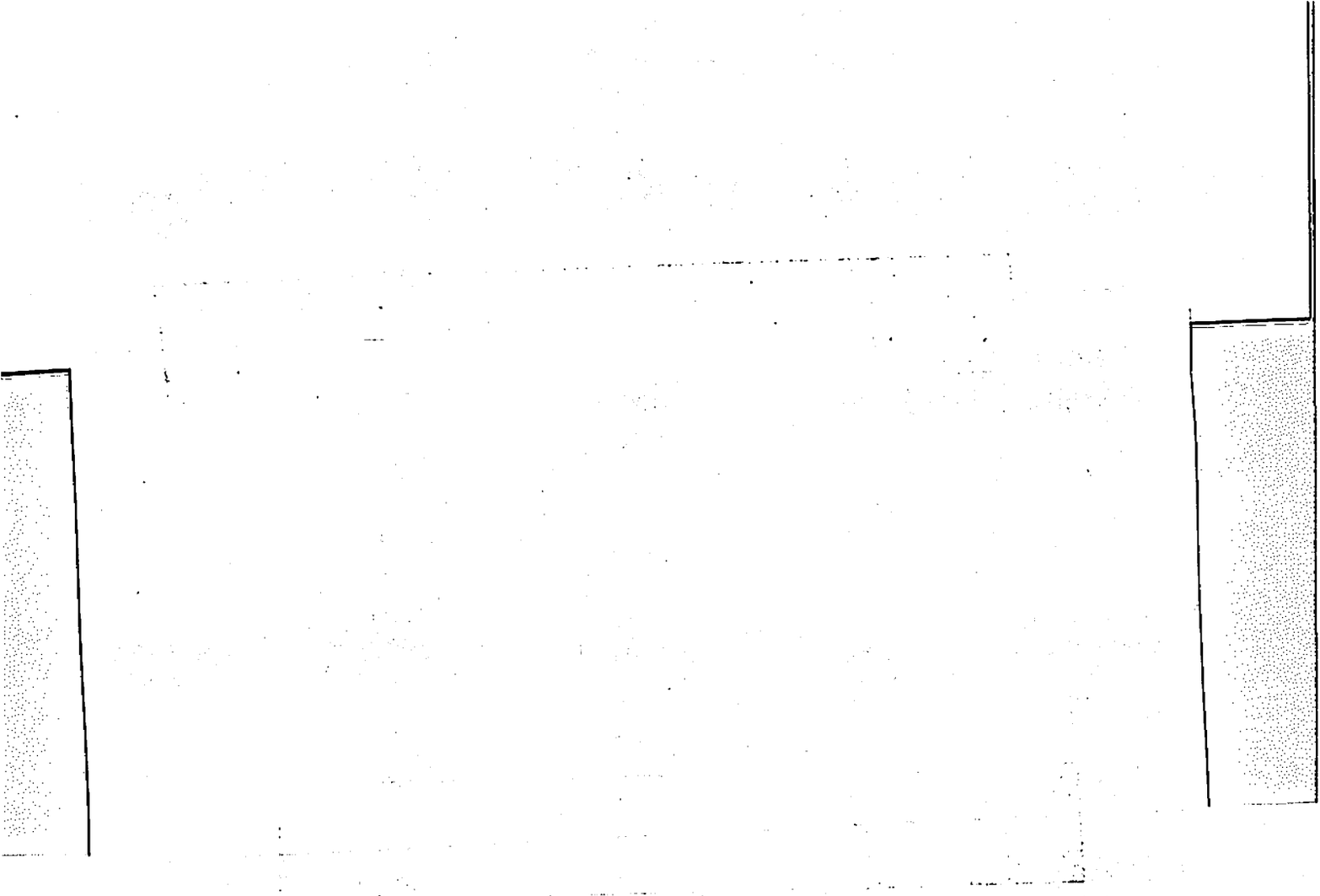
"Very few of these kids can generate alternatives," Ms. Burgoyne suggests. "We help them to identify their interests in the area of things they might enjoy, and then assist them in finding an organized way of expressing these interests."

After the youths are released, the case counselors continue to work closely with them for six months.

"The program is a gigantic networking exercise," Professor Catalano says. "We are working with several systems—the family, the institution, schools, the workplace, the parole officer—and providing a consistent link across systems."

Elizabeth Wells, post-doctoral research associate and research director (left), and Kathleen Burgoyne, teaching associate and clinical director, Project Adapt.

To determine the effectiveness of these strategies, the project will follow the 75 youths in the program and a control group at six and 12 months after the skills class ends.

"The average annual cost of maintaining a youth in a detention facility is around $25,000," Professor Hawkins says. "It's very expensive to just lock kids up. If nothing is done to ease the transition and maintain the gains made while kids are institutionalized, chances are they'll be in detention again as adults."

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