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<http://www.staradvertiser.com/2017/09/12/editorial/island-voices/at-risk-youth-need-support-not-segregation/>

## **Editorial | Island Voices**

# **At-risk youth need support, not segregation**

In 2013, I was a member of the state task force that worked to reform Hawaii's juvenile justice laws. I have known and worked with people administering the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility (HYCF) for many years. I am also a former at-risk juvenile.

I lived on my own at age 14, dropped out of school in the 10th grade, was briefly incarcerated at age 16, and had a baby when I was 18. Since age 19, I have worked in education, and since age 25 (for 40 years), I have worked with and studied social and justice systems, mostly concerning marginalized populations.

Mahalo for Susan Essoyan's reporting ("Juvenile Justice," Star-Advertiser, Sept. 3-4), and for your newspaper's concern for at-risk youth at HYCF (Hawaii's juvenile prison). That article raised important questions and concerns about the administration of HYCF and Mark Patterson's goals. I believe that Patterson's intentions and efforts are in the best interests of the youth under his care, and that the problems are less about management, but mainly about using institutional residential care for at-risk youth.

The costs of providing institutional residential care for at-risk youth are more than monetary. Research shows that placing troubled youth together in shared residences, and programs, is often more harmful than helpful. University of Maryland criminology professor Denise Gottfredson, a nationally recognized expert in juvenile delinquency prevention, recommends against placing at-risk youth together, even for job training purposes. And most parents would agree that placing their children with behavioral difficulties, with other youth facing similar problems, would be a bad idea.

Instead of placing troubled youth together, working with individuals and supporting their goals, and what they care about, is more likely to help them develop into responsible adults.

Ryan Speedo Green's life, described by Daniel Bergner in the book "Sing for My Life," is an example of how supporting an individual leads to more positive outcomes. Green behaved violently in his youth, and was institutionalized, but when he was given the opportunity to pursue his passion for music, he was on the path to becoming non-violent, and the opera singer he is today.

While I believe it is more harmful than beneficial to provide programs for troubled youth that segregate them, I believe HYCF's Patterson has helped at-risk youth in valuable ways.

Patterson was instrumental in providing a nationally and internationally replicated restorative reentry process to hundreds of women in our state prison. The process allows an incarcerated person to make amends with loved ones, and helps children address the trauma of having an incarcerated parent. Independent research shows the process helps prevent crime. Patterson also helped a dozen youth receive the restorative intervention at HYCF, where he supports providing a mediation and facilitation training program for youth and staff. Giving youth on probation, who are at-risk, jobs working on HYCF's ranchlands, is also important. Work and meaningful activity are vital for rehabilitation. These activities, and relationships with law abiding others, help individuals desist from crime.

While youth commonly make bad decisions, their rate of rehabilitation is higher than adults. Many readers probably made some poor decisions in their youth, but became law-abiding adults.

Western culture promotes isolating people who misbehave, and ignores our shared values. We gain from being together, not isolated and segregated.

Martin Luther King Jr. said it is “communication” and “knowing each other” that leads to understanding and peace. We can only know each other when we are together.

We should stop segregating at-risk youth in institutions and programs and assist them individually instead. HYCF would be better as a ranch and farm for the public where all families and youth could work together.

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