

Episode 167 - Ronjonette Harrison: Innovative Change for Juvenile Offenders Through Legislation and Intervention

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello and welcome to social work. My name is Charles Syms and I am your host for this episode the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reported that in 2012 there were over one point three million arrests of persons under the age of 18. The overwhelming majority of these arrests were for relatively minor criminal acts. In most states individuals under the age of 16 or 17 who are arrested will have their cases heard in juvenile or family courts. These courts are designed to meet the unique needs of the adolescent and their families. However in the states of New York and North Carolina 16 and 17 year olds who are arrested find their cases referred to adult criminal court regardless of the severity of the crime. There is growing concern that this policy does not serve the best interests of the young offender or the community at large. In New York State the raise the age campaign is an effort to change the state's law and move cases involving 16 and 17 year old offenders out of adult courts. Today's guest helps us understand why this is important and how it could work.

[00:02:02] Ronjonette Harrison is a licensed clinical social worker with more than 15 years of experience. She is a juvenile justice coordinator in the Erie County Family Court and an adjunct faculty member at the State University of New York Buffalo State an advocate for youth involved in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Ms. Harrison also specializes in work with women and families impacted by childhood trauma. She received her masters of social work degree from Stony Brook University Stony Brook New York in today's podcast Ms Harrison identifies a differential response to young people in the child welfare system as opposed to the juvenile justice system. She explains what the raise the age campaign is and why it is important to stop managing 16 and 17 year old offenders in adult courts. Ms. Harrison describes an alternative process being utilized in Erie County a specialized court housed within adult court designed to meet the unique needs of these young arrestees. The reports thus far of increased youth and family engagement and reduction in the recidivism are encouraging. The podcast ends with suggestions for social workers wanting to address this issue on the micro and macro levels. Ms Harrison was interviewed in December of 2014 by Dr. Patricia Logan Greene an assistant professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Hello. My name is Patricia Logan-Greene. I'm an assistant professor at the University at Buffalo School Social Work Here with me today to talk about new initiatives for juveniles involved with the justice system. Ms. Ronjonette Harrison. Thank you for joining me today. Thank you for having me. So I want to start with the story of your background and how you became interested in this population OK.

[00:04:11] Well the story really goes is that I always tell people social work kind of calmed me. I was raised by my grandmother who took me into what is now known as kinship care. So most of my teenage years I've had some experience with human service workers or social workers coming in and out of the home. And I wasn't really sure what social work was or even that I was inclined to be a social worker. But I remember taking undergraduate courses and hearing about some of the vulnerable populations reminded me of some instances of myself and individuals in our family but definitely things that I was seeing in my community. And I had this passion to want to make change. So I actually bought into going into social work and undergraduate. I went to graduate school at Stony Brook University and when I returned back to Buffalo my dream was to work in child welfare which I did for quite some time. But then the opportunity came up for me some work

where Erie County Family Court as a juvenile justice coordinator. And that really changed not only in my pathway of the population that I will work with I'm referring to juvenile justice Urena but it would also educate me in a way of understanding how advocacy and social policies really impacted the work that we did as clinicians and social workers during your time in this field what sort of trends have you seen. I think the trends kind of come and go right.

[00:05:44] But the one thing that I've seen throughout time is a lot of the disparities in how services are delivered and who is actually offered effective evidence based services within a cultural and social kind of contexts. So in child welfare we know that a lot of young people who come through that arena but they will be offered services from the start. There was mental health services support services additional services for their family members. And it was ongoing. It seemed to be a different type of notion of caring for them because they were involved in the system because it was not issues or effort of their own but for their parents or caretakers. However when young people came to that pathway of Juvenile Justice understanding that developmentally they don't really have the capacity to always make the best decisions. As my grandmother would say that you sometimes do dumb stuff. They were treated much differently even for low level that is offenses where at times they weren't offered services at all. Many service providers became very irritated with the behaviors although they had a diagnosis conduct disorder or depression or NEHTA. So what we were seeing throughout the years is that there seemed to be compassionate delivery of services from one group of people but not for another. And throughout my time what we really try to do is educate workers not only about their own biases but by the biases that we kind of accumulate within the group structures and kind of the burnout that social workers and other human services obtained throughout the years. So hopefully where I hope where we're going is that people are more educated.

[00:07:28] That doesn't really matter which pathway you come into these systems most often the story looks the same and that we look at people in these young people's circumstances as individuals plan their anger. New York state is relatively unique and how it treats 16 and 17 year olds who have committed crimes. Tell me about that. Well New York State along with North Carolina are the only two states and our nation that still prosecutes young people the age of 16 17 year olds as adults does not matter the level of offense or the nature of the crime. Anything from trespassing to felony offenses can deem a young person to be involved in the adult criminal justice system from start to finish. And how does that compare to other states. Well other states seem to be a little bit more progressive on those New York State is known to be a sphere here. And many of these social justice and social policy initiatives this raised the ages legislation legislation that is not new to New York State nor is it to North Carolina. In reality we've been going back and forth probably the past 10 years of trying to push a more appropriate level of intervention on a policy level for the past 10 years so that the notion is that we want to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to the age of 18. However we've been able to reach that level although the past two years we've had a lot of momentum of sharing a weariness about this issue and having the governor and our other elected officials sign onto say that there at least needs to be a discussion and there needs to be a committee of experts and young people who give solutions to this issue. So we are moving forward but we still have some ways to go.

[00:09:25] How did the 16 and 17 year old fare when they're transferred to adult court in adult prisons. Not very well sort of given a sample because I know not everyone is familiar and each state and sometimes counties do things differently. So an example would be let's say Sami Sami is 15 and is currently involved in the juvenile justice system and here in New York State in Erie County Sammy got in trouble he would be picked up. He would get an appearance ticket to go to probation with his family. They would be offered services community service different type of the sort of justice activities to promote social good public safety but also to find ways to deal with some of the issues that might be going on with little Sammy. And the hope is is that little Sam will get all these upfront initiatives and services to help from further penetrating into the criminal justice system.

However it Sammy turns 16 the next day and he does another dumb little thing right. And he no longer has that option just an appearance ticket for a low status or misdemeanor offense. He is going to be arrested. He's going to go to jail which here is our holding center and he is going to be arraigned in front of a court and open court where he is going to be mixed in with all different types of adults who have different types of offenses. He will be given a public defender. And the process depending on the level of crime in that offense will go. Therefore the problem with that is that most times young people are coming in and are very careful.

[00:11:10] And I think there's a contradiction of how we label young people in some segues we're saying you are a young person. You need to go to school you're mandated to do certain things. However there's a different piece where we're saying that you're an adult and you are solely responsible for your behaviors and it doesn't matter. You know we're not looking at family contacts we're not going to look at environmental issues or any other issue that might be going on nor do we have to give you services. So the reality is that we set young people up from failure for a moment that they enter the adult system because we don't provide or we don't have to provide comprehensive assessments. We don't have to offer any services and we don't have to look at any other measures of diversion besides jail or other very intrusive interventions. So what are some current initiatives that have helped to tackle these issues. Well back in 2011 judge Lippman the chief judge here from New York State he developed nine pilot programs throughout the state to really address the issue of young adults being placed in adult facilities in Erie County. Left wing was one of those cons that were chosen pacifically a full city court judge McLeod as the presiding judge. And what we were able to do is come up with this comprehensive way of managing cases which is really managing young people through a specialized court. So there's a few things that would happen when young people come in. One you're going to see the same judge from start to finish.

[00:12:47] Two we are also mandate that some type of adult or caretaker be a part of that process which normally would not have to happen in three. The judge is going to refer this young person for a full evaluation and evaluation. We're going to look at social psychological environment issues and what we found out is that many of the young people who were coming and had many impairments in their daily functioning many of them are homeless. Which we love to say we don't even say. We say to them when displaced Gray. But the reality is that these young people do not have stable housing for six months to a year of the time that they actually committed the offence and was arrested. We have a long term complex issues of trauma. Whether that was something that was directly you know sent towards them rather it was witnessed domestic violence or other offenses. Now one of the major pieces is community violence that a lot of our young people are being of and witnessing in that community and really become sensitized from the response of trauma. So those are some of the major issues that we were seeing. And in a report that we can hear back to the Justice say yes Sammy has these low level offenses. But there's a lot of other things that are going on and that this young person was being seen in the family court. They will be offered services like wraparound services or other interventions not just to look at the offense but to look at the underlying issues in just McCleod allowed us to do that.

[00:14:18] So when young people were coming and being assessed we would be able to intervene and provide not only mental health treatment substance abuse treatment but also link them to other services getting a link to educational supports and vocational and employment that really began to change the platform of what adult court or juvenile court would look like here. How successful has this initiative been. Well we've been pretty successful in 2014. There was a final count. So in August 4 for 2014 6200 and 24 adolescents were diverted from all of the nine pilot programs in New York State. And those are not duplicated cases. So what we're looking at is that the recidivism rate was somewhere about 25 percent. That is really destroying the area because we know that normally when young kids are placed into the adult system that increases their chances of

recidivism it actually increases their chances that they're going to move up a level to more severe and violent offenses. So what would happen to a youth involved in this program after the judge directs them for a referral. So once after the judge has given them furrow just without has several different agencies that he can utilize that's based upon the location of where the young people in his family live at or other expertise that he has he may offer as opposed to another. But the agency that I was working for which is her probation helping to empower at risk teens what that organization really look to do is not to have a cookie cutter approach but to look at each individual and to come up with an assessment and interventions that were solely based upon those individual needs.

[00:16:09] Therefore when we look at the treatment plant one person may come for individual counseling and group counseling and they could be there three or four days a week as opposed to someone else who only needs to come in twice a week because they have a strong support to some of the other behavioral or emotional issues that aren't really there. So this is not a cookie cutter approach really dealt with a lot of upfront emphasis on that assessment. And again we would mandate that an adult would be present with that young person. And this really had to do with a lot of building the relational piece especially because we know that most of the individuals that we were working with were males who were there of African-American or Latino descent. So it is important that we establish these relationships from with both the young person and their peers and are caretakers in this really changed the framework of how intervention happens. And I think a lot of this happened because the young people had a history of some type of family court involvement rather than either the juvenile justice system or the child welfare system. Parents often oftentimes felt like they were the reason or they were always being blamed if their child were having behavior problems or were making poor choices. But what we tried to do was build these trusting relationships that they would come in consistently because the word mandated. It's you know oh you're mandated to come here. But the reality is that they had a choice to go to any services that they wanted to go to.

[00:17:45] So during our relationship during a comprehensive assessment really finding out not only what we believe their needs were and some of the challenging pieces to deal with some of the deficits whether that be family or financial whatever was the need for her but to involve the family and the parents and such that they could describe and articulate what they felt like their needs were in starting not as a platform of growth. What we found not only you know this kind of formula to go with it but when we had families that were really resistant to being there because a they don't believe that they really did the feds or B some of them are very low key offenses trespassing being caught with marijuana. Some of those things the PMs will be. I read it that they have to go through that process. But what we found is that once we develop the platform of intervention is that the parents will begin to come in and request their own counseling sessions and that more information about these family secret come out. So issues of abuse. Rather that was between an adult an adult and oftentimes we were seeing that there was domestic violence issues between siblings and their parents or that young person appearing in these things that a lot of times adults are not going to talk about issues of incest physical sexual abuse issues with education deficits and developmental delays that really were not being discussed for many different reasons but for whatever reason I had this magical thing happen and the young people begin to come consistently outside of this mandate for the courts and then we have parents who were at one point part of that intervention process with their child but then they came in and wanted services on their own and began to reveal that they also have this history of traumatic experiences and some of the poor parenting things that they had incorporate into their family system.

[00:19:43] So now we have an opportunity that goes way beyond a criminal offense. We have an opportunity to not only help and we build individuals and children but to rebuild families. And I think the real notion was to help them rebuild communities. So to me all of these components really go together. And I think social workers we've kind of gotten away from the foundations of what our

profession was based upon and really looking at the advocacy piece being a voice for the people and understanding how speaking about social policy even if you're not the person who wants to the capitals and push these reforms. But having that dialogue about it and understanding how those reforms really impact or kind of fragment your ability to work with young people or whoever your population is. So I think those are some of the major factors that made our work a little bit different. Looking at the framework from relational ecological nano and basing that as our introduction into the integration of services. Tell me more about the relational ecological model. Well the relational oncological moto initially I don't think that we knew we were developing a model. We did not know but we would have these weekly meetings to discuss cases and we were discussing the framework of what we were doing that was Berkey why were young people coming even after they had fulfilled the requirements for the quarter. Why were parents more involved in our programs and services as opposed to any historical involvement that they may have had. And we were part of this research.

[00:21:27] The Erie County New York State had researchers that came in to look at these pilot programs and we conducted surveys sheet for our participants in what we looked at and what we try to kind of model were how do the clients relate to the social worker that they had. And there were certain I guess deliberate things that we put in place. One is that which I thought was really progressive is that the staff at heart not only live in community worked in a community. Many of them were from that community and that in itself changes the platform of how you engage each other. So all young people who see their counselors at the corner store at the gas station we knew upfront about some of their behaviors out in the community and we use that information and we use that relationship and we use that environment to kind of play and influence what was happening inside of the clinical sessions. So the whole entire model was really just based on establishing relationships with clinicians and clients who had very similar backgrounds rather than race and ethnic backgrounds. Whether that's the location and your language. So we're using all of those pieces on this kind of cultural piece of connecting and that has been kind of our Keylee out of how we build positive relationships. How do you see addressing the problem of criminal behavior amongst 16 and 17 year olds and treating them not as adults but using this more compassionate model as benefiting the whole community for several reasons. And I'll start where many of our elected officials and community leaders are going to always look first. And the reality is we're talking about funding.

[00:23:23] And one of the proposed arguments is that it's going to cost communities tons of money that they don't have in your budget to implement such programs. And I really have to disagree with that stance because we were able to and from a crossroads for little to no money. So let me explain what that means. The first year which was back in 2009 in which Crossroads was kind of developed even before John Schlichtmann made this announcement. We did this based upon collaboration as soul an organization who was going to work with young people from mental health to the mental health component. Then we also saw that there was an educational and employment issue. And there was another agency that would deal with that. So instead of the agency or the courts trying to take on the working the cost of dealing with this population we really sat around and we had a collaborative approach which is very much the same as what they do in family court. In our ideal was that even with this legislation that we are proposing to raise the age of responsibility that those cases didn't necessarily have to go to family court. So we're not going to put a string of on case management because that's what courts are known for right. Courts are there to manage cases so we don't to put a strain on the courts in managing their cases because now we have these there loads of young people who are coming in that they would not normally have to see. But those cases would still stay in City Court and the adult system. But they will fall still under a juvenile offender specialized court room. Most of what we have right now.

[00:25:07] And the number of young people coming out into the case management piece would be

relatively the same. We actually have seen a decrease in those and has seen a decrease. And to the location of young people coming through the courts for some of the same type of crimes. But in addition it didn't cost of course any additional money. There was not a hiring staff that went into that. There wasn't a hire additional judges that had to oversee those cases everything stayed the same. And the collaboration came from different organizations coming on and taking pieces that they specialize in to make the process much easier. Each stakeholder pretty much making a promise that they would work on certain parts of that puzzle for the young person and we will be reporting directly to the judge read it out this weekly or twice a week or whatever he his mandate would be. So this whole argument that is going to cause cities and counties tremendous amount of money to implement a specialized court I think is really just true. And we've seen that here about four city court where we were able to implement a program with no additional funding no additional staff. But really moving towards this whole sense of collaboration and using stakeholders which we are all talking about. But I think to actually effectively use the resources that we have in our community we've proven wow. So the costs and where there's just such an important aspect of a major argument that opposes have. But the second piece that is really important is the recidivism rates.

[00:26:44] So we've seen them drop over time especially here where we are here in Erie County to about 25 percent which is really a significant drop. And when we're talking about the citizens especially when we're not talking about a duplication of cases so looking at individual cases that came out and duplications of. And I think that this is really profound because something else happens in the whole notion of these interventions are really not about the criminal offense. So we're talking about them because as most often the issue that has led the person into the course of course they will be there for something else. But as I stated earlier there are so many other underlying issues that are going on that once we break through that we found that you're building a person self awareness and self-esteem you know reconnecting them to communities. So an example would be please use the word. Did the baby business association you know we've done some work with other community activists and we use those young people to go back into those same communities either that they live there whether they are finished and which is normally the same community and we have them do a work to be part of that process so they can be integrated and feel connected to the community that they've taken so much from. That is a piece of restorative justice activity that we found to be profoundly effective and connecting young people to the community and allowing older people people who are working and contributing to the community to know who the young people are. That is one of the pieces that really helps to keep the rates down because young people then feel connected.

[00:28:25] So when they see different crimes form on and we've seen this happen actually in one of our little community events people begin to speak up and say no you can't do that here. This is my neighborhood. We're not on ABC. And that's something totally different from a young person who comes in and they don't they have any kind of measure. And then the last ones that I would want to put on is that we know that any young person is put into the facility. There's other social emotional costs that can't be recalled. So when we have young people who are sexually assaulted in adult prisons because they are increased by 50 percent having a chance of being sexually assaulted in jail. Thirty five percent increase of being physically assaulted by an officer because the officer is there just to conduct and make sure that there's water. The one thing that we know about young people is that they don't sometimes do so well in those kind of arenas and that the officers are saying we just see them as another inmate. My job is just to make sure things are flowing so we have impulsive teenagers. We have teenagers that are sometimes making poor decisions. We have teenagers who are in adult facilities that have a history of trauma and we're asking them to follow these guidelines. They are going to be some mishaps.

[00:29:45] So the reality is that keeping them out of those around us and giving them community based resources there there's a game not just for that young person to have a life but I'm having this

criminal record attached to them and giving them an opportunity to get reconnected to education and vocational opportunities both for families and communities to come together and be able to use them as a resource in that community and to be able to you know potentially help other young people not you know kind of make some of the same poor choices but also a decrease in our system of having bodies in prison systems that are already overcrowded and using resources and dollars for young people that can be used at a lower rate in a community based setting. And that was correct. What is the relationship of law enforcement that is. Great question. Law enforcement is very vital to this whole process at this point. Legislation is talking about raising the age of criminal responsibility. But I think what we're really trying to get to is not having young people enter the criminal justice system. And part of the work that we found is that there's a fear that is very tangible between young people and law enforcement. And we can't get away from that even with this ordeal in Ferguson to say that there's something that's real. So I think that training of law enforcement both on the street who are working in communities but also within the legal system. So when young people are coming into the system the clerks all the other folks that they're intervening with. There has to be more of an understanding in a building of relationships. And I've been working with some of the council members one council member in particular as the university council member. Rashie right. And there's also the massive district council member Damian Smith who are very engaged in the community and are opening the platforms for youth to have conversations with law enforcement.

[00:31:49] Also teaching them about how we should intervene with law enforcement. Sometimes there's just this invisible layer of confusion that comes because I don't know and I've heard from young people both who ran because someone ran in some who really because they really had done something wrong. But not knowing what the appropriate reaction should have been when they were intervening by law enforcement. But I think law enforcement also has a great responsibility here. And I think we've gotten away from that of having law enforcement be part of the community setting. So in the summertime when I was in my office looking in between kind of a private practice I would see the cop cars driving up and down the street. And I imagine will it be really nice if they were walking to be where they could meet those young guys who are seen around the corner and have a conversation with them and find out is this really a group of kids that you know hanging out and just talking to each other. Is this the sense of the legal activity that's going on this corner. But there's no relationship between community and law enforcement. And I think that if we open that conversation to talk about who we are and your individual lives communities what are some of the barriers and the challenges and how do we build trust so we can minimize and hopefully diminish much of the fear that is surrounding who the people are mostly we're talking about for my Sansone minority men black Hispanic who this forcibly enter the criminal justice system that the juvenile justice system the child welfare system but their first contact oftentimes I won't to be long for.

[00:33:32] So what can we do what those initial steps to still ensure public safety. They have a job to do and we support that. But there's another side to this as well. So I'm hoping that we can continue to platform to have a conversation definitely implement training so that law enforcers have a better idea why people may react the way the act which I won't go into that but the last piece to that I want to just put on is that oftentimes our young people are labeled as oppositional conduct disorder but many of the behaviors that we're seeing are symptoms of something totally different. So I think there has to be an educational piece there so they can understand when they're interacting with somebody young people. There's oftentimes something else that's going on and we can have a better gasing of that. Maybe they won't be sent to the holding center or maybe they'll be sent the U.S. embassy. Maybe there's some other intervention that is more appropriate at that time. What can social workers who are concerned about these issues do on either a micro or macro level. Well I think social workers or social workers can do on the micro level is just remember that our profession is built on speaking for the underclass speaking for those individuals who don't have a voice. So advocacy is an important position that we must hold and I think that we must educate

ourselves about social policy and how they directly impact the clients that we serve. So as an educator the one thing that I've been doing is using case studies in any opportunity that I have to talk about raising the age.

[00:35:03] So I really charge educators to do such the same such things to bring to light other things that they can do in direct practice is to find models that are socially responsive to the individuals have been working with and have a better understanding of not just what's on paper as far as the charges that are delivered to them but I definitely would suggest that people go a step further and find the right assessment tools and the right intervention measures that will help to decrease the probability of recidivism. And on a micro level what I think is really important is to just get engaged whether that's writing to your elected officials writing to the governor sending out e-mails that help other people understand what this legislation is all about to educate yourself. One of the things that we've done here in the city of Buffalo is that we have community meetings and we ensure that there are times out this is this issue where issues of that are very important to us in our community that we're speaking to the young people about that we're talking to our neighbors and black club members about it. So any opportunity to get the information out to others is very important. A part of educating but is also a part of pushing legislation letting our elected officials know what is important to us in our communities and ensuring that the next generation of social workers are empowered to move forward and keep the notion of what is advocacy in our life. And then the last thing as far as on the micro level is to engage our corporate officials with training that describes what specialized courts are in meeting the needs of youth to developmentally age appropriate interventions.

[00:36:54] Are there Web sites or similar resources that people could look to for more information about the raise the age. Yes. Yes. One of the sites that you can go to is W W dot NY courts dot gov. This will give you information about the pilot programs that are established here in New York state and will also give you some statistics about what is working and what seems to be effective with this population and you can also go to raise the age. Dot com. Get the facts so be informed get information and you can of course join their e-mail and newsletter to stay on top of any new events that happen. Well thank you so much for talking to me today. Luncheonette thank you. It was a pleasure. You have been listening to Dr. Patricia Logan-Greene speaking with Ms Ronjonette Harrison about juvenile justice in New York's raise the age for criminal responsibility campaign. Please join us again and social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school or our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu and while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.